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A FAMILY TREE

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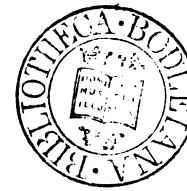
A FAMILY TREE.

BY

ALBANY DE FONBLANQUE,

AUTHOR OF "THE TANGLED SKEIN," "CUT ADRIFT,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. II.



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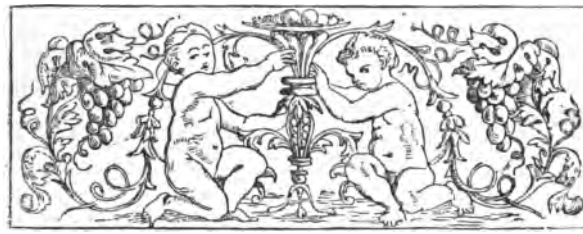
A FAMILY TREE.

BOOK I.

THE ROOTS OF IT—*continued.*



CHAPTER XIV.

THE CASKET WITH THREE KEYS.

THE experiment made before her own eyes of the effect of sudden heat upon unholy water had considerably shaken Martha Denys' impression that her master was in league with the powers of darkness. Her son, instead of merely laughing at her fears as heretofore, set to work at removing them now that affairs had taken so grave a turn outside; and actually got her to accompany him over the old brewhouse, and judge for herself as to the character of its contents.

"Bring as much holy water as thou wilt, and throw it where thou pleasest. Thou canst rust some tools, and put out the forge fire, an thou dost pour enough; but that is all," he said.

She declined to renew her test, and listened patiently to his explanation, under which even the awe-conspiring machine itself was stripped of its demoniacal character, and stood an innocent but complicated construction of rolls, and wheels and cranks, which moved backwards and forwards at her will. The bones, about which the town was raving, had no horrors for her. She had seen them come in a cart.

But the strongest influence in her master's favour—an influence which removed her last suspicion, and made her his warm defender—arose out of his condemnation by the people, and their ingratitude. The man who had saved her life, whose bounty to the poor had passed through her hands, whose unnumbered acts of kindness were

well-known to her, was at his worst (as it seemed) a noble soul tempted by the evil one. As such she had feared for him, prayed for him, and loved him throughout. How dared they (the people) condemn him! How dared they circulate and credit such lies! How dared they threaten his life!

You may force yourself to believe hard things against one you love! may blame him, may grow cold to him; but let an outsider come and give expression to your own convictions, and away fly hard thoughts, and blame, and coldness, leaving the love stronger than ever. Take sides between husband and wife, and see if you don't make enemies of both. Interfere with the intestine strife of a nation, and the belligerents will make peace if only to resent your impertinence. Had the good folks of Manchester let Hugh Desmond alone, it is possible that some unsatisfied doubt would have smouldered in the breast of his housekeeper for all time; but treating him as they did, the last spark was extinguished.

Loyally and bravely she remained at her post, guarding the house confided to her care, though several well-disposed neighbours begged her to quit the accursed place, and offered her a home with them. Not a step would she budge, not a door would she open, though Master Willford tried hard to get admission under various pretences. Loyally and bravely she met the accusations current against her absent master, and stood up for him; rated some roundly for their ingratitude, and some for their folly, getting sharp answers and cold looks for her pains, until at last she was pelted in the streets, and the awful cry, "Witch! witch!" raised after her once more.

This was Master Willford's work. It did not suit him that his strong point—the discovery of those bones—should be explained away. Now that Desmond was pronounced a wizard, all he had argued in favour of the poor old woman went for nought. The crafty witch-finder had only

to recall what had passed that day on the banks of the Irwell, not only to render innocuous all Martha Denys could say, but to keep her at home on peril of her life. Thus he silenced her, and kept the fire ablaze against her master.

She was quite alone now. Ten days had passed since Gregory had gone—she knew not whither—at Hugh Desmond's bidding, and nothing had been heard of him. She had no friend, no protection now, and so great had become the outcry against her, that she dared not set her foot abroad even to buy the ordinary necessities of life. She was half-starved; but the thought of escaping her trouble by flight never entered her mind. The suspicion that Desmond had deserted her never once dawned upon it. Knowing the temper of the town as she did, she prayed that he might not return. Gregory would warn him. Gregory would be sent for her—might come at any moment. So the faithful creature waited and watched, true to her charge,

true to her faith in the goodness of the man for whose sake she had been beaten from the streets and denied a crust of bread.

For the last day or two she had lived on unleavened cakes made from some grain she found in the stable, and which, as there was no fuel left in the house, she baked at the forge. She had now got quite accustomed to the old brewhouse. There was barely a measure of corn to begin with, and just two handfuls of it were left. They were put by for the present, but hunger drove her to them long before its dawn. She pounded the grain as fine as she could, mixed the dough, blew up the fire into a blaze, and by its light saw what she took for Hugh Desmond's ghost watching her.

Her terror was so intense that she could neither shriek nor move, nor turn her eyes from the object, nor evade it as it rose and placed a hand on her shoulder. Well might she take it for her master's spirit,

if spirits from the other world appear as when Death's icy hand closes upon them in this. Wan, haggard, aged, shrunken, and grey, as though twenty years had passed over his head; but it was Hugh Desmond, alive! His hand upon her shoulder was flesh and blood, but his face was the ghost of what she remembered it, and from his lips came the ghost of his once cheery voice.

"Why, Martha! thou here? For what purpose hast thou lit the fire?"

In a few words she told him her plight, and his peril.

"Good, faithful friend," he exclaimed, "thou shalt not suffer," and he made towards the door.

"What wouldst thou do?" she cried, detaining him.

"Buy thee food."

"They will kill thee."

"Let them."

"Master! master! they have threatened——"

"The curs! Yes, they have threatened, have snarled, but they dare not bite."

"But thou art unarmed," persisted the dame, touching his empty belt.

"This," raising his riding-whip, "will suffice. I pray thee let me pass."

All good folks had been abed and asleep for two hours when Hugh Desmond strode along the dark and deserted streets to the Golden Boar. To take the bull by the horns, to bell the cat, to meet danger three-fourths of the way, had been his policy through a life which had known many dangers, and he was not going to flinch now. He made straight for the Golden Boar, knocked up a drawer, made a raid upon the larder, and was on his way back, laden with meat, bread, and wine, before that domestic was fairly awake, and could summon courage to cry "Thieves!" which he did lustily, as soon as the marauder was well out of hearing.

The first person who appeared in answer to this alarm was Master Willford. Per-

haps he had been roused by the knocking, for he came forth from his chamber dressed and with his sword on.

Leaving Dame Martha to appease her hunger, Hugh Desmond went to his own room and returned with several parchments and a small iron box.

"Give me all your attention," he said, "for what I have to say is of the last import to me, and—what is left of mine."

"What is left?" she asked, struck by the utter despair which marked his concluding words.

"Aye, what is left," he repeated. "Sometimes it seems as though it were years and years ago, sometimes as but yesterday, good Martha, that I had a loving, tender wife and two sweet children. Nay, interrupt me not. My wife is dead—murdered. My boy was stolen from me by her assassins in the confusion which followed her death. I must, I *will* find him, Martha, and every hour I delay here may add days to my agony of suspense; therefore ask no ques-

tions, but do my bidding. Thou hast been faithful in a small matter; can I trust thee with a weighty one?"

"I am but a poor lone woman, and——"

"Yes, yes, I know what thou wouldst say. Gregory, thy son, will be here to-morrow. He will take thee to a place of safety, but I must leave at once, perhaps never to return."

"It is best so," she replied, quickly. "Thy life——"

"Is a charmed one, I fear," he said, "but let that pass. I am a rich man in worldly goods; and these" (laying his hand upon the parchments)—"represent the bulk of my possessions. I may not carry them with me. I must place them in safe custody until I find my boy, or—— Now, mark me: I shall place them in yonder casket. It was intended for a very different purpose, but it will serve for this. It opens with three keys, if they be properly applied. Here they are: one iron, one silver, one gold. Should opportunity

serve, I shall make a formal disposition of my property by will in favour of my children—or my child; and if I should fall before we meet again, thou wilt deliver the casket and its contents to such as by my will are entitled to hold it. But I may have no chance of making such a disposition, therefore I have shown thee these keys. They will speak my will. If ever they are brought to thee, be sure that Hugh Desmond is dead, and that the bearer has been trusted by him with them, *and more.* Dost comprehend me?"

"I do; but how am *I* to protect so sacred a charge?" cried Martha, wringing her hands.

"Thy son will help thee."

"Alas! he is but a poor smith, and when thou art gone——"

"I have many powerful enemies," he interrupted, "and my friends are few and humble—all but one. I try to submit to the punishment with which it has pleased God to afflict me, but I do *not* believe that

my sins will be visited upon my innocent children. I believe in the Almighty's justice, and in some men's gratitude."

"Be sure of mine," she said, taking his hand, and kissing it.

Martha Denys was an old woman, not in years, perhaps, but worn and faded by care. She had nothing of the charm which makes the winter of a happy life as lovely as its spring. Her grey locks were scanty, her eyes were dim, her cheeks haggard and colourless, and yet as she spoke there came into her face a light which made it almost beautiful—the light of truth shining from a grateful heart.

"Thou hast proved thyself loyal and true," he replied, "so has thy son, and so also has a poor lad who is grievously hurt for my sake. You are the only three upon whom I can count, for the other will soon go to his own country."

"Oh, master! there be surely others! Thou art so generous, so noble! Be cer-

tain thou hast made friends, great and powerful."

"When Goliath of Gath came forth against Israel, did the king's captains save him? Did his mighty men of war rid him of the Philistines? No! a pebble of the brook from the sling of a poor shepherd slew the giant. God's ways are not our ways, Martha Denys, and He has planted a conviction here" (laying his hand upon his heart)—"which tells me who will protect the innocent when I am gone. It was in my mind," he continued, after a pause, "to take an oath from thee that thou wouldst faithfully perform the trust of which I spoke just now."

"I will swear."

"Thou shalt, but not alone, hear me first."

He rose, lifted his right hand on high, and in a measured solemn voice spoke these words.

"*May God so deal with me and mine, as I and they—knowing of this my vow—deal*

with thee and thine; so long as there may be a Desmond with power to protect, and a Denys who needs protection."

She knelt by his side, and echoed him thus:

"*And may He so deal with me and mine; as I and they—with knowledge of my oath—deal with thee and thine; so long as there may be a Denys to serve and a Desmond who needs our service.*"

He stooped down over her, kissed her poor furrowed brow with a son's reverence, gathered up the parchments, and was about to open the casket which was to contain them, when it suddenly occurred to him that he had left the outer gate, leading from the yard into the street, open.

Going out for Dame Martha's supper he had only closed, without fastening it, and returning with his hands full, had shouldered it ajar and passed in intending to come back and bolt it when he had disposed of his load. He "made" it securely enough

this time, and once more had his hand on the casket.

This strange piece of workmanship has been described in the first chapter of my story. It was not quite finished even now as to its outward decoration, but this did not affect its strength. Though by no means large, it was immensely strong, and compact. Small as were its keys, they moved with ease three broad bolts of steel which shot into the mass of the lid, and held it as though it were forged in one mass with the rest. No violence from without could loosen their hold; no instrument known in those days could force them. The casket might, indeed, be broken to pieces by repeated blows of the heaviest sledge-hammer, but nothing, save its own keys, could open it; and they had to be applied—as its maker had hinted—*properly.* He had expressed all the knowledge of lock-making he had acquired abroad, and all his own ingenuity in making the opening a puzzle. It was a

labour of love. The casket was intended for Sweetheart's jewels, and often, as he worked upon it, he had smiled in anticipation of her surprise when, with the keys at her command, she should find that she could not open it. Alas! she was in her grave. She would never see the quaint fancies his loving hands had fashioned for her. They would never be completed now.

He gathered up the parchments, and opened the casket in this wise. He unlocked it with the gold key; he unlocked it with the silver key; he *locked* it with the key of iron, and, this done, a fourth key hole appeared, into which the gold key being pressed, without turning it, the lid rose by itself. To close it, the above process had to be reversed.

Then he returned to where Dame Martha sat, pondering over what he had told her, and indicating the small iron box, before mentioned, said,

"This is for thee. Gregory will be

here to-morrow—perhaps to-night. He will help thee to remove the casket, but in the mean time I will place it beyond the reach of our enemies."

As he spoke he pressed his heel upon the corner of one of the flagstones close to the forge and it turned up on a pivot disclosing a small vault.

"I know not for what purpose this place was made," he said, as she drew back in surprise and crossed herself vigorously, "I discovered it by accident, and little thought it would some day stand me in need. It will serve me now."

He lowered the casket, replaced the stone, and continued, "I have given thee and thy son this house with all it contains. When the brainless cry against us has died out (as it will shortly) thou canst return and dwell here or deal with the place as ye list. It is thine. For thy present wants take this (pressing a heavy purse into her hand). If I am alive this day month, I will see thee again where

Gregory will conduct thee, and — Ha! What mean those lights?"

She had no time to thank him for his bounty, and one glance through the half-closed door sufficed to answer the question which had interrupted his instructions.

The street was full of an infuriated mob bearing torches and shouting "He has come back! He is in his Devil's den again! Death to the Wizard!"

"Fly for thy life," whispered Martha; "fly by the yard wicket door which leads to the river—lose not a moment—fly, or they will kill thee!"

"But the casket—the papers?"

"Leave them to me. What are they in comparison with thy life? Fly, fly!"

"And abandon thee to their fury? Never!"

"I have a hiding-place they cannot find. For thy children's sake save thyself, and trust to me."

She barred the massive doors of the laboratory as she spoke. The mob was

increasing, the shouts grew louder. As the fugitives crossed the yard the whole street seemed ablaze, but the enemy was too infuriated to think of the commonest strategy. Their attack was confined to the front; the rear was dark and silent. Desmond had gained the fields by the water side, and Dame Martha was in her hiding-place, before a crash and a fierce cheer announced that the outer gates had given way, and the house was at the mercy of the mob.

Some made for the dwelling-rooms and began to destroy and plunder, but the main body surrounded the old brew-house, waving their torches and screaming "Burn him! Burn him in his den!" Whilst the most vigorous and practical brought straw from the stable, and faggots from the wood stack, which they piled against the doors, or threw torches through the windows, to carry out the verdict. A goodly heap of combustible matter was thus obtained, and was well ablaze when Master Willford ap-

peared on the scene agitated by the strangest excitement. He dashed aside those who were feeding the flames. He tore away the burning fagots with his naked hands. He stamped upon the glowing straw, and shouted to his friends—his dear friends! to help him for God's sake.

"Put out the fire!" he shouted; "drag these logs away; bring water! Oh, bring water!"

Now Master Willford was the instigator, if not the leader, of this raid. He had followed Desmond from the "Golden Boar" unperceived by him, into the yard, where, crouched under one of the lower windows, he overheard a good deal of what Dame Martha had been told. Luckily for himself he made good his retreat a few moments before her master bethought him of the open door. Late as it was the witch-finder knocked up his principal adherents. He told them that the Lord had delivered the Wizard into their hands, and bade each go forth, and rouse

the righteous of his acquaintance—with what result we know. The news ran fast—too fast. The mob rose, and had half done their work before their chief arrived to direct it.

CHAPTER XV.

MINE AND COUNTERMINE.

ENTHUSIASM is catching. Master Willford seemed so thoroughly in earnest in his own efforts to put out the fire, and called so peremptorily for help to do so, that many took it for granted that he must be right, and assisted him. Some dragged away the crackling fagots, and some ran for water to throw upon them, Master Willford encouraging them with a "Well done! Bravely done! More water, good lad. Ha! that was right! Oh, my masters, how could you have been

so rash? Out with the fire; then we will force the doors, and take him alive!"

He did not want to take him alive; but it by no means suited him that they should burn the old brew-house, where the casket was. It was not eagerness to capture the reputed wizard alive which prompted his efforts against the doors, when the fire had been scattered and stamped out. It was not Hugh Desmond he was striving so hard to save.

Under his directions axes were procured, and many a lusty blow fell upon the great doors. A heavy bench was brought from the house, and made into a battering-ram, which six strong men charged against them. When they gave way, the mob would rush in and execute their blind vengeance upon the wizard, and—all would be well.

Thud—d! thud—d! thud—d! went the battering-ram; but the great doors shook and groaned—that was all. Iron-clasped, and bossed all over, they were too hot to

handle, too strong to yield to the instruments brought against them.

A sullen murmur ran through the crowd. Master Willford had spoiled their sport. Master Willford could not force the entrance, as he had promised. Why hadn't he left them alone? What right had he to order them? What was the use of breaking in?—burning was a proper death for a wizard!

He knew what mobs are made of, and he knew that this one was slipping from under his control. His once most obedient adherents had thrown down their improvised battering-engine, saying it was no use, and were muttering together.

The old cry, "Death to the wizard! Burn him! burn him!" again arose; and some began to collect the fragments of the extinguished bonfire in order to begin again their own way. They were spared this trouble. One of the torches which had been flung through the windows before Master Willford's arrival, had fallen into the cor-

ner which Desmond used as a laboratory. As it fell, it broke a large flask full of alcohol, and sent its contents in a flaring stream over and down the shelving, which, being constructed of old and dry wood, was quickly enveloped in flames. The roof had caught, and the whole inside was well aglow before the mob—concentrated at the front, where there was no aperture but those obstinate doors—became aware of the joyful fact.

As they rebelled and scattered, some passed round the side saw the light; and then what a scream of exultation arose! The cursed place was on fire within. They had the wizard now. If they could not break in, he could not break out. He was doomed. His own evil den would be his death-pyre!

His persecutors became drunk with joy. No one could restrain them now. More torches were hurled through the windows; but the flames within needed no such stimulant. They roared and raged like

some caged monster, until at last they burst forth. Down came the roof with an awful crash, dragging with it the greater portion of one of the side walls.

Smothered under this mass of brick and dust, the conflagration never regained its mastery. Here and there it flickered up, but it had done its worst.

When the flames first blazed out, the heat became so great that the mob was forced back, step by step, until the yard was abandoned. Fortunately for adjacent houses, there was no wind; the flames went straight up into the calm night. Hugh Desmond, riding alone over Kersal Moor, saw the light in the sky, and knew what it meant.

Before daybreak the fire, and the fury of those who had raised it, burned themselves out. The one left a black heap of smoking ruins; the other an unpleasant feeling that a mistake had been made, for which some one would have to answer. When the joyful fact that the "devil's den" was on fire

inside became known, a score of eager disputants contended for the honour and glory of having thrown the torch which lit the conflagration. It was curious now to note that no one would admit having had a torch at all! Every one had just come out to see what was going on—no more.

Master Willford came into favour again, and the number of persons who begged him to remember how actively they had assisted him in putting *out* the fire was remarkable. Several of these had cursed and hustled him when the fickle crowd turned against his interference; but he bore no malice. He not only forgave, but forgot—or pretended to forget, which came to the same thing—that any differences had arisen. They were all there to put *out* the fire. No one had thrown any torch. The wretched man (meaning Desmond) must have fired the place by accident in his endeavour to escape, or—here the speaker turned his eyes towards Heaven, clasped his hands, and sighed.

Wizard or no wizard, you could not burn a man's house over his head, even in those good old times, for nothing. Report ran that there were two dead bodies under that black and smoking pile, and Master Coroner was at work to find them.

Master Coroner was a much greater man in the good old times than he is now. He was not a respectable apothecary, or a second-class attorney, but one of the highest dignitaries in the county. He did not hold his court in the parlour of the "Cat and Bagpipes," assisted by a jury, which, affected by the associations of the spot, gave the characteristics of a free and easy to their proceedings, and shout "hear, hear," when he sums up to their satisfaction. Master Coroner of the old sort ran no risk of being bullied over his accounts by a court of quarter sessions, because he had no accounts to render. He rode to his quest with a dozen men at arms at his back, and his word was law. When Shakespeare makes his second grave-digger

in "Hamlet" ask, "Is that law?" and the first replies, "Aye, marry! Crowner's quest law," no sneer is intended as I read the text. On the contrary. "Crowner's quest law" was not to be trifled with in the good old times.

Master Coroner satisfied himself that Desmond and Martha Denys were in the old brew-house when it was assailed by the mob, and there being nothing to show that they got out, set his men at work to find their bodies. Thus far he acted wisely and well; but he made a serious mistake when, misled by Master Willford's supposed interposition in the interests of law and order, he appointed him to direct the search.

He commenced his operations exactly over the spot where Desmond had opened the casket. This was also where the side wall had fallen in and smothered the flames. As long as the labourers worked, he watched. He never left them a moment. Whenever a half-charred beam was removed, he was the first to examine

the spot uncovered. Whenever a spade struck against any hard substance, he would thrust down his hand to find out what it was. He showed so much care and diligence the first two days, that Master Coroner left the business entirely in his charge.

Still, I say that Master Coroner made a mistake. Had there been a dozen dead bodies under those ruins, not one of them would have been found—by the workmen, at least. Without a body, there could not be an inquest; without an inquest, there could be no investigation into Desmond's affairs. He was the last of his race—so far as was known in Manchester. He had no kith or kin to ask what property he left. His estates would revert to the crown—*or might be taken possession of by any one who was clever enough to find out where they were, and hold his tongue!* But if a body were found and an inquisition held, everybody would know as much as Stephen Willford.

This careful searcher was the first to arrive in the morning, the last to leave at night. He took a look around before the others arrived and after they left. He locked the yard and house doors, and carried the key in his belt. The house was deserted, and no one could get into the yard without his permission—at least, so he thought.

But every night, when all was still and dark, two men and a woman appeared, as though by magic, in that corner of the burned building where the walls were still standing. They could not work openly without being discovered, so they began to drive a sort of tunnel through the débris, which would lead them straight to where the forge had stood. Slowly and silently they worked; and when daybreak was near they hid the mouth of their shaft with rubbish, and disappeared as suddenly as they had come.

This went on for about a week; Master Willford clearing away the ruins by day,

the others undermining them by night. Sooner or later, if they both went on in the directions they had taken, they would meet. On the eighth night only a yard or two separated them. A few vigorous blows of the pick by the recognized labourers would disclose the tunnel of the night-workers! These blows were not to be given.

That very night something compact and heavy, that was not a stone or a lump of bricks, was passed through the tunnel and carried off by one of the men, accompanied by the woman. The other man went back to the end of the shaft, and scattered the contents of two large flasks he had brought with him upon the half-burned ruins on either side.

When Master Willford arrived in the morning, he was surprised to see small whiffs of smoke curling up here and there from the ruins. He noticed also that the latter were unusually hot. He and his workers had now got down to things which were almost untouched by the fire, though

crushed by the falling roof. Supposing that some relics of heat were still smouldering below, he caused water to be poured over the spot from which the smoke issued. This only increased it. He walked round to the far end to see if there were any heat there, and in his absence some of the labourers dragged out a larger rafter, with the object of giving better play to their water.

No sooner had they done so than a column of flame sprang forth. The most furious bursts of the original conflagration were pale and tame in comparison with this. It seemed to set the very stones on fire. It spread with amazing rapidity. In less time, almost, than one takes to write the words, it formed there new craters. It shed a thick black smoke, which choked and blinded the astonished workmen, and drove them back far into the street. It did not flare and crackle like ordinary fire, but consumed all before it silently, as a piece of silver-paper is burned up!

Weeks afterwards, when what was left of the ruins could be examined, brick and stone were found melted, and glued together in fantastic vitreous lumps by the intensity of its heat. Nothing that fire could destroy escaped it. The great machine lay a shapeless mass of metal! Any human body would, of course, have been utterly encindered, and so the search for Desmond's remains and those of his housekeeper were abandoned.

Ignorance, and its ally—Superstition—accounted for this new wonder in their own style. It was the Demon's work! There were secrets buried under those ruins which he did not wish to see the light. That was no common fire—it was the horrid element of the bottomless pit, specially exported for the purpose! And they were partly right; it was *not* common fire, but it did not come from the store indicated, nor had the arch-fiend any direct hand in its application. It was simply Greek fire, which Hugh Desmond had learned to prepare.

Why did he thus destroy the ruins of his laboratory? He had two reasons: he wished to stop the search for his (supposed) dead body, and to conceal his removal of the casket. He was content that all his enemies—and especially Vincenti Della Torre — should consider him as dead. If the search continued, and no remains were found, a doubt, which might put that person on his guard, would arise, and be strengthened by the discovery of the tunnel, which he had no time to fill up. He remained concealed at Prestwick (where he met Gregory by previous arrangement) the night of the attack upon his house. Found out through the smith where his mother was concealed; joined her in disguise; and when the turmoil and excitement over the second fire was at its height, these three slipped quietly out of the town unchallenged and unrecognized.

And they took the casket with them!

Witch-finding, when conducted upon abstract principles, was poor work. There

was nothing—not even glory—to be got out of roasting a lot of miserable old women in those *good old days.* So much the worse for the abstract principles, thought the more advanced professors of this art and mystery, amongst whom Master Willford was a shining light. The fear and horror caused by roastings, for which certain ignorant, but honest, fanatics were responsible, placed a weapon in the hands of their unprincipled successors, which they used with considerable profit. These practitioners had to roast a witch or two occasionally, just to keep up the excitement; but their grand *coups* were directed against well-to-do middle-class people, who would either fly from an accusation of witchcraft, or pay black mail to suppress it. If they fled, they left pickings; if they remained, they were plucked! If one took heart of grace and resisted, she was tried *pour encourager les autres.* We have seen what "trying" (in this connection) meant, in the case of Martha Denys. It was only one

degree removed from execution. Conducted upon these principles, witch-finding became a profitable business.

The feelings which Master Willford entertained towards Hugh Desmond, had changed materially since the day when that malicious bodkin-thrust was given. Then he only hated him for the pain and disappointment he had caused. Later on, he perceived in him an opponent whose presence would be a perpetual stumbling-block in his path; and lastly, he saw how he might obtain revenge, immunity, and wealth, all by one blow! This was when, crouching under the window, he overheard the conversation between Desmond and Dame Martha. He determined to hound the already excited populace upon them, and to seize for himself the casket and the deeds it contained. The mob, as we know, were a little too quick for him, and spoiled his plan by firing the brewhouse.

Well, obtaining the casket was one means towards his end. This had failed,

but there were others as yet untried. He worked them out in his cold, cruel mind, as though they were sums in arithmetic.

Desmond was dead—that was his starting point—and had left considerable wealth *somewhere.* For whom? For a child which had remained for years unrecognised. Was that child likely to be aware of its rights? Who was there to uphold her in claiming them? Four persons only, according to her father's statement. One who would shortly leave the country, and upon whom he seemed to place little reliance; Dame Martha; her son, the smith; and a wounded servant, not named. Everything went to show Desmond had chosen the dame as his confidante in chief, and intended that the others should be informed and instructed through her. She had perished, and her vow ended with her life. Who could prove now that Desmond had ever been married? The whole course of his life since his return to England was,

practically, a denial of the fact. A man in his position—argued Master Willford—does not hide away his wife, whatever he might do with one who stood in another relationship.

This point could be dealt with where it arose. At present there was no occasion to raise it. By way of putting out a feeler to discover the direction and force of possible opposition, the witch-finder obtained an order to take possession of the house and premises of the deceased, Hugh Desmond, at Manchester, for the benefit of whomsoever it might concern—and it appeared to concern no one.

Then he advanced a step, and took out administration to all the estate and effects of Hugh Desmond, lately departed this life.

In doing this he invited opposition, but none appeared. But where was all that estate; and what were those effects? Was he, after all, to get nothing for his trouble beyond the half-burned wholly-plundered

house at Manchester? It appeared so. As he turned the matter over and over in his active mind; he became more and more convinced that the delicate-handed master mariner from the Netherlands — Señor Porras—was in some way mixed up with Desmond's affairs, and knew his secrets. Why, otherwise, should he have troubled himself to get up that charge against Gregory? Why have taken such personal interest in the search for which it was made the excuse? Why have left the town immediately afterwards? Again, what were the errands of those messengers? of the rider from London looking for a foreigner, supposed to be with Señor Porras, and of the other (on Desmond's own horse), who came after him and relieved him of his mission? Señor Porras and his man had gone away for a week (as they had told their host), leaving their baggage behind them; and they had not been heard of for six! during which time Desmond's wife—or at any rate the mother of his children—

had been killed and his boy carried off! All this taken together gave Master Willford hopes that he should yet obtain the clue he sought. And he was not mistaken.

One evening Señor Porras rode up to the "Golden Boar" alone, much changed in appearance. His once grave, cold manner had left him. He had become restless, and assumed a levity inconsistent with his character, and strangely at variance with the haggard expression of his face, and the hunted look in his eyes. When told what had befallen Hugh Desmond, great was his horror and surprise!—too great, thought Master Willford; for this crafty one had seen him halt at the scene of the late catastrophe, and gaze wistfully at the ruins as he came into the town.

"He knew all," mused the witch-finder, "before he was told about it here. He would not have come if he had not known it."

He had been ill—so he said—with fever, and prayed Master Willford to let him share his room, for he knew not at what moment his sickness might return. He pressed this request with childish persistence; repeating it frequently after it had been granted. Sometimes when Desmond was mentioned he would start up with a moan or a cry, and adjure his companion for God's sake not to speak of him, and yet ten minutes afterwards he would himself return to the subject.

At night he had frightful dreams, and muttered in his sleep. It may be that this broke Master Willford's rest—it may be that he did not seek slumber. He did not complain, and as soon as the muttering began he was leaning over the pillow of the dream-haunted man, catching every word that escaped his lips.

Thus passed four days. On the morning of the fifth Señor Porras bade his host farewell. Master Willford also took leave of his friends. It would be some months—he

said—before he should see them again. His friend was going to London, and as his own business lay in that direction, they would ride together.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE KING'S BUSINESS.

COSMO DE RIBOLINI, Dame Martha, and her son were the only three persons who knew that the burning ruins of his laboratory were not Hugh Desmond's grave. Dick Earle returned to London the day after Sweetheart's funeral. Tom Stevens was too ill with his wounds, and little Maria too young to be told anything. It suited Desmond that the news of his death should be spread abroad. When he was unknown he became his own bio-

grapher, and told the strange story in many a town which he visited in his renewed chase of the assassins. He made what huntsmen call "a cast." Manchester, Shrewsbury, Coventry, Derby, and intervening points, formed his first circle. Then deeming that they would seek a sea-port, he tried Hull and Bristol—all in vain. Cosmo went with him, and their common grief ripened respect and pity into a warm friendship.

"Trust me, brother mine," said the latter one day, "that my first counsel to thee was wise. They know not thy country well enough to take cross roads, or hie them to a small port. They have made for London, and to London we should go."

"I am known there," Desmond replied.

"To how many?—A score, maybe. Thou needst not go in their way. There be many places, I'll warrant, in that great city, where none would imagine or busy themselves about thee. I have thy good friend Master Earle."

"He must not know."

"Is he not trustworthy?"

"Aye, true as steel, but there are those about him who might unwittingly betray me. The fewer there are in a secret the more likely is it to be kept."

"True; but the more there are in a secret the better chance of success. Your friend, the goldsmith, can help *me* to find de la Torre, without being told anything about thee."

"Thou art right," Desmond replied, after a pause; "we will go to London, and if we fail there——"

"I will tell thee," interrupted Cosmo. "If we fail in London we will go straight to Italy. The 'Venno' is at my orders; he will hunt these murderers in their own country, where they are known, and to which, believe me, they are sure to return as quickly as they can."

"But my boy—my lost boy?" moaned Desmond.

"Thou shalt seek him wheresoever thou

wilt. The path to him is through them; but in the mean time thou must provide a home for his sister."

"She is safe with Dame Martha."

"Safe, may be," said Cosmo, a little loftily; "but the blood which runs in her veins demands gentler nurture than the good dame can afford. The lady, who will soon be my wife, will take charge of her for my sake, and quickly learn to love her for her own."

Desmond pressed his hand in silence.

"Besides," continued the young Italian, "an thou didst leave her here thou wouldst be in daily fear—I know thee—for her safety."

"She is all left to me—God help me!"

Cosmo had no comfort to give him. He had no doubt but that little Hugh was with his mother. The child would have embarrassed her murderers in their flight. His presence would have served to identify them. During the search already made,

Desmond had heard of many passing strangers, amongst whom might have been those he sought, but in no case was there a child with them.

"There will be an outcry when I marry," said Cosmo, to change the subject, "so I shall bring my bride to England for a while. It likes me much, this England, brother mine. By that time thou wilt have come to life again."

"For what?" he asked, sadly. "To drag about for a few years longer this poor body, which is but the coffin of a dead heart, and dead hopes."

To London they went. Desmond hid himself under an assumed name in the Borough of Southwark, and Cosmo took up his quarters once more with Martin Earle, whom he found in great grief at the loss of his friend, and indignation at the charges made against him. For you may be sure that the story of his end had not lost any of its wonders on the way. 'Prentice Dick was heartily sorry too, and

had other troubles on his mind, which he took the first opportunity of imparting to Cosmo.

"Thou hast told mine uncle nothing of his wife" (like most people who speak of the newly dead, he did not mention names), he said, half as a question, and half as a reproach.

"Did we not both promise him solemnly to keep silence on that subject?"

"Aye, we did; but he is dead now."

"The more reason that we should keep our vow."

"But the child, signor—the child?"

"Is in my charge; let that suffice, Master Earle."

"Then it behoves thee to look to her interest."

"Most certainly I shall."

"We—I mean mine uncle—has a large sum in his hands which belonged to her father, and should now be hers," said Dick, after a pause.

"Art sure?"

"Certain. Some of it is placed out at usance; some is in our coffers."

"Dost know the amount?"

"Some ten thousand pounds."

"Well, let it remain where it is. It could not be in better keeping, good Dick. Let it remain where it is, for the present at least. And mark me! As thou loved my brother, keep his secret, until ——"

"Go on: until?"

"Until we have found that black-hearted villain who slew my sister, and stole her boy," Cosmo replied, quickly. "That is what I meant. Then little Maria may claim her own in safety."

"I see; thou art right, Signor," mused Dick.

And so the subject ended for that day.

It came up again before the week was out. A stranger called upon the goldsmith, and had a long private conference with him, armed with certain papers which authorized him to take possession, in the name of the

Crown, of all the estate and effects of Hugh Desmond, who had died intestate, and leaving no kin to inherit his wealth. This stranger made no definite claim upon Martin Earle. He came for information, having heard that the goldsmith had at one time been the deceased man's agent, and, as such, might know where he had disposed of his property. Would he (Earle) help him? His name was Willford—Stephen Willford, a humble servant of my lord the Bishop of Chester—to discharge his trust?"

The goldsmith was man of business enough to see that the documents produced were in order, and man of the world enough not to say so. He replied that Master Desmond had indeed consulted him as to the placing of his monies, and perhaps he might be able to find out where they had been invested; but Master Willford would excuse his saying that he must have some legal advice before he took an active part in such investigations.

Master Willford was not the least offended. They would go together to some man of law, at the goldsmith's own convenience. There was no hurry, only—he added with some emphasis—as it was the king's business there must be no unnecessary delay.

Master Willford stated his case well—not a word too much, not an expression or a tone which could suggest any personal interest in it. And his finale was a clincher. It was dangerous to hinder the king's business in those *good old days.* There was only one thing not quite clear to Martin Earle, and this was—how did his visitor find out that he had had business transactions with Hugh Desmond? He asked the question, and was told that the fact had been gleaned from some books and papers saved from the fire. Now we know that there was absolutely nothing saved from the fire; but you will remember that good Señor Porras was busy with certain books and papers, whilst Master Constable was fussing about the old

brew-house the day when perquisition was made for Marco's purse.

Master Willford took his departure, having arranged to call again that time on the morrow, and accompany Master Earle to the man of law who was to advise him; and as soon as he was gone the goldsmith called Dick, and bade him make up a statement of Hugh Desmond's account. Dick, having that conversation with Cosmo de Ribolini fresh in his mind, was somewhat confused at this order, and asked, "What for?" Whereupon his uncle, who was not in his usual good humour, bade him mind his own business, sharply. Dick swallowed the snub and set to work, but with an inward resolve that his task should not be an easy, or at any rate a short one.

Of course he told Cosmo, and the two, putting this and that together, came readily to the conclusion that the stranger had something to do with it; and when Master Earle casually mentioned his late visitor's name, the truth flashed upon them both.

Willford, the witch-finder, Desmond's enemy, the man who had stirred up all Manchester against him; his murderer, in the belief of one of them, was seeking to gain possession of his estate!

What was to be done? Consult with Desmond? thought Cosmo. Most assuredly that was the first thing. The result of such consultation would arrange the rest. But how was Dick, who thought him dead, to be put off? How was the goldsmith to be delayed? mused Dick. Master Willford might waive the necessity for a formal account. Martin Earle might take the preparation of one out of his 'prentice's hands and render it himself. "He has it at his fingers' ends," moaned Dick; "*he* could do it in an hour." Cosmo, utterly bewildered, mounted the high horse, and told the 'prentice to occupy himself with his own affairs. Dick, smarting under the former application of this formula, fired up and told him roundly that it *was* his own affair. His uncle and master was being imposed upon.

"Leave it all to me," said the young noble, more haughtily than ever, "and meddle not with things which neither thy years or thy station permit thee to understand."

This was too much for Dick.

"Leave it all to thee!" he cried. "That is what thou saidst to poor Master Desmond, and a pretty evil thou didst bring upon him! But for thee and thy wise counsels his wife would be alive and his boy safe. To the devil with thy family secrets, thy mysteries, and thy cut-throat vendettas! I'll none of them. Leave it all to thee, quotha! No, Signor: this is England, and a good merchant of London is not to be cozened, or a little maiden robbed of her rights, whilst an indifferent honest 'prentice is about to see justice done."

"When thou hast recovered thy senses thou mayest ask my pardon for this insolence," Cosmo replied loftily, taking up his hat and sword. "For the present thine *honesty* will do well to ponder on the

promise under which thy betters trusted thee."

Ten minutes afterwards he was sorry for having used this taunt. He could not but admire Dick's bull-dog character, and one shot which the 'prentice had fired in his anger went home. Desmond had never reproached him, but he had often reproached himself for over confidence in his own schemes. But for him Sweetheart might indeed have been spared, and her child be safe. Dick's words fell like a blow upon a bruise.

Well, he would see Desmond; tell him what had happened, get his permission to undeceive the lad (and his uncle too, if need be), and then their quarrel could be easily made up. He took a wherry, crossed the Thames to the landing-place nearest to where Desmond lodged, but found him not. He had been out all day, mayhap be would be back soon, said the drawer, mayhap not at all that day. He was very uncertain. Cosmo's stock of English was

too small for questioning, so he said he'd wait, and waited.

Three hours passed, night came on, and no Desmond! To go back and face Dick again, as unprepared as ever to answer him, was one evil—to remain where he was, unable to make himself understood with the risk of being turned out into the street if Desmond did not appear; was another. Which was the least? Cosmo turned them over in his mind and chose the former. He had always come there by boat; in a short time the watermen would cease to ply, and he had not the faintest idea how to find his way home over the bridge. He could avoid Dick that night, and be off again after Desmond the first thing in the morning.

This resolution was taken just in time. As he gained the river-side he met the last waterman marching homeward with his sculls on his shoulder, and had to give him about five times his proper fare to induce him to make the trip.

Father Thames was clean in those days. He had forget-me-nots at Wapping and water-lilies off the Isle of Dogs. His receding tides left gold bright sand and glittering pebbles, where they now deposit black mud, old shoes, and the surplus feline population.

Salmon was caught at Isleworth, and the good folks of Greenwich could drink of his waters. But he was not doing much business then. Some twenty ships were anchored off the Tower—the largest barely of eighty tons; no tall chimneys vomited smoke, sulphurous acid, and the *bouquet* of bone-crushing. No line of light marked the profile of his shores.

All was dark and silent as Cosmo took his seat in the wherry, and its unwilling rower shoved off into the stream. Three parts of the passage was quickly made, and then they got into trouble. A vessel was anchored right in their way. The rower tried to pass her by the bow, but he miscalculated his distance in the dark, or the

tide was too strong for him, or he was too tired after a long day's work to cope with it. He fouled her chain, and snap went his right hand scull.

In an instant the stream whisked the wherry round, and sent her stern foremost under the vessel's side.

"Hold on!" shouted the waterman. "Hold on for your life."

Cosmo obeyed mechanically; clutched a dead eye of the main rigging, and brought the boat up. Scarcely had he done so when another order came; from the ship this time.

"Cast off —— you! Cast off, or I'll sink ye."

"Hold on!" again shouted the waterman to Cosmo.

"Why, comrade!" he continued to the man who now appeared on the bulwark with a huge lump of ballast, with which to carry out his threat, in his hand. "D'ye take us for thieves?"

"You've no business here, shove off."

"Yes, and get swamped at the bridge! I've broken one of my sculls—that's all."

The man lowered his missile, somewhat mollified and the other went on :—

"Thou dost keep a good watch, partner." This was intended as a compliment, but only produced a surly

"What is that to thee! Art going?"

"Aye, an thou wilt lend me a scull. I'm a licensed waterman, John Trumble, at your service. I'll bring it back in the morning."

"I've none to lend."

"Then sell us one, the gentleman will pay."

The last four words had become familiar to Cosmo, who pricked up his ears and added.

"Oh ya—as, I pay—good."

"A foreigner!" cried the man of the ship with a start as Cosmo spoke, and again lifting his chunk of ballast when the latter rose. "Keep back! Make one step to get on board and by God I'll brain thee."

He was diverted by a hand laid on him from behind, and a voice which whispered "What is this?"

"A shore boat," he replied in the same tone. "Pretend they've broken a scull, and want to get on board. Hark'ye, Master Willford—one of them's a foreigner."

"Ha! let me speak to them."

"Be careful. If *he* should hear!"

"Hold thy tongue. It is thou who wilt rouse him with thy loud talk and cursing. Now, sir," he said to Cosmo taking the other's place "what wouldst thou?"

"A scull an't please ye," replied the waterman. "The gentleman don't understand much English. I broke one of mine on your chain and this tide would have me under the bridge in a jiffey, if I don't get another."

"Give him one, and let them go," said Willford, and it was handed over the side.

"I shall know the ship again I daresay," quoth the waterman, "but you'd better give me her name."

"It matters not," Willford replied.

"Well then, thine, or the captain's?"

"Give thee good night."

"Blame me not if thou seest no more of thy scull then," said Trumble.

"Keep it and welcome, good fellow; only trouble me no more—it is late, and I am weary."

As they passed under the stern they heard a cry from the cabin, and the sound of a scuffle. Then all was silent again.

"There's something wrong over there," said John Trumble with a jerk of his head towards the ship, as Cosmo jumped ashore; "but it's no business of mine."

"How is she call?" asked Cosmo in his broken English.

"I not know," the waterman replied, thinking to be best understood by adopting the same patois.

"I will pay for him," pointing to the odd scull.

"They no want pay. They give—Master Willford, give."

"Master Willford!" cried Cosmo in surprise.

"Aye, that's what the other fellow called him. I heard he's master there, and they're up to no good. He was too civil by half, and his man too saucy, to be honest. Honest folks don't give away things to strangers for nothing. They don't want me to go back with this 'ere—that's it."

Cosmo made his way back to Lombard Street, and found lights burning in the counting-house, though it was long after the usual time for closing that department.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MAN WHO SHRIEKS AT NIGHT.

LIGHTS were burning in the counting-house, and Dick and his uncle were there, not busy, but plunged in thought.

To explain this phenomenon, we must go back to the time when Cosmo left. He had hardly gained the street when the goldsmith bustled in, and wanted to know what was the matter.

"Nothing," said Dick.

"Nothing! Dost shout like that for nothing? Dost look as red as an angry turkey-cock for nothing? Thou hast been

quarrelling with my guest: thou hast offended him."

"Mayhap."

"Mayhap! Marry-come-up! Mayhap! How darest thou?"

"Uncle," pleaded Dick, "bear with me. If thou didst know all, thou wouldst not blame me."

Dick was not red-faced now, and there was a tremor in his voice which disarmed Martin Earle.

"Out with it, my boy," he said, kindly, laying his hand upon Dick's shoulder. "I have never been hard with thee, and shall not begin now. I am thine uncle and master; I can be more—make me thy friend. Is 't money or a woman, Dick?"

"Both; but not in the way thou dost hint. That man who was here with thee this morning is at the root of it."

"Master Willford! Dost know him?"

"Aye; that is, I know of him. Uncle, he is one of Hugh Desmond's worst enemies. It was he who had him accused of witch-

craft." And having thus broken the ice, Dick went on to tell all he had heard from Desmond himself and from Gregory Denys on the subject.

"A knave—a very knave," mused the goldsmith, half to himself; "but he has warrant for what he seeks."

"Hugh Desmond's inheritance?"

"Who told thee that?"

"I did but guess."

"Thou art a shrewd guesser. Thou art right. His possessions revert to the crown, as he left no kin."

"I am not sure of that," said Dick.

"Wiser heads than thine are; mine for one. I have read the sworn depositions," said the goldsmith.

"That Master Desmond left no kin? Wilt say who made them?" asked the 'prentice, eagerly.

"To begin with, four of his father's oldest friends, who——"

"Pshaw! what know they of him?" Dick interrupted.

"Patience, malapert! When the last of his brothers died, and he was no one knew where, those friends often heard the old man say that he was the last of his blood —that there was no Desmond left. Now dost understand? When the wanderer returned, they also heard his father beg him to marry, that he might see a grandchild before he died. He never did. Hugh would not wed. All this is proved, and Master Willford is appointed the king's receiver. But what has this to do with the viscount and thee?"

"Uncle, we had strange adventures upon our travels. Thou knowest that we encountered Master Desmond. We found him where none who knew him thought he dwelt. We saw what he would fain have hidden from all the world, but could not from us."

"Methinks I understand," said Martin Earle, shading his eyes with his hand. "Poor woman! poor woman! Were there children, Dick?"

"Two."

"Young children?"

"Almost babies."

"Poor little things! Well, they have their mother," sighed Earle.

"She is dead."

"Dick! Oh! Dick, why didst not tell me this before?" cried the goldsmith. "Who has cared for them?"

"They are in no present need," Dick replied; "but thou wilt see her—thou wilt see them righted?"

"They are sinless, but must bear the consequence of their parents' sin," said Earle, sadly. "In the eye of the law they have no father."

"But their inheritance——"

"My good Dick, they have none. But again I ask, why shouldst thou and Signor de Ribolini quarrel over this?"

"*Ask him,*" said Dick. "Nay" (seeing that his uncle was nettled at this apparently disrespectful reply), "I would answer thee if I might. He, too, is pledged to

secrecy, but less bounden than I am, because——Oh Lord! oh Lord! I cannot explain without telling the whole story. Good uncle, ask him to unloose my tongue."

"Why, how can I?"

"Let me ask him *for* you. If he will, you shall know all."

"And if he refuse?"

"I'll forswear myself," groaned the 'prentice, "it's the lesser of two evils, and the only way out of the maze."

I have said that Cosmo de Ribolini was sorry for having spoken so sharply to Dick, because he felt that he was right. Dick, on his side, had no regrets for the strong language he had used, and looked forward with pleasure to the further opportunity which was now presented for giving the Italian another piece of his mind; because he persuaded himself that Cosmo was not true.

Now that Sweetheart and her husband were no more, he wanted to hush up their marriage. Perhaps he would take care of

little Maria, adopt her or something of the sort, but this was not enough for Dick. He was young, you see, and very British. The idea that the child of an Englishman should be deprived of her name, and a slur thrown upon her parents; to pander to the pride of a foreigner, made his blood boil. Young British blood does not boil now-a-days—it isn't good form—and in this respect, I fancy, the *good old times* had the best of it.

So they waited up for Cosmo, and the goldsmith had begun to fear that he had been driven from the house by Dick's rudeness, when in he came.

Dick had carefully prepared what he had to say, and having risen and made a profound obeisance, intended to be very cutting, began :—

"Most excellent signor, my uncle here wishes to address thee, and has perforce to do so through my interpretation. Have the condescension, therefore, to consider that he is speaking, and not I; and to reply to

him, and not to me. Without understanding what passed between us this morning, thy sudden departure and the sound of my voice led him to believe that we had been in dispute. Will it please your excellency to inform him what was the cause of our difference?"

"Let it pass, good Dick," whispered Cosmo. "Let it pass. We were both wrong, and both mean well."

"I will answer for one," Dick replied stiffly.

"In the name of God! why take this tone with me?" muttered the other. "Thou wilt repent this."

"Threats are no use, Signor de Ribolini."

"What does he say?" demanded the goldsmith.

"I mean no threat," replied Cosmo. "You will repent this, because it brings into peril the interest of those whom in thine honest, but wrong-headed way, thou wouldst serve."

"Will he explain?" asked Martin Earle, getting impatient.

"What says thy uncle?" demanded Cosmo.

Poor Dick! Like M. Jourdain's housemaid, Cosmo fenced contrary to all rule. He ought to have fallen back upon his dignity, and haughtily declined to be catechised. Then Dick would have said,—

"I consider, most excellent, that Master Desmond's death, and your refusal to do justice to his children and his memory, releases me from the promise I made. Therefore——" and he would have told all he knew.

Cosmo had no right to come in with his "Let it pass, good Dick." *Good Dick!* indeed, and he as mad with him as one man can be with another!

Thus thrown out, perplexed, angry with himself for being angry, assailed by a cross fire of, "What does he say?" alternately in English and Italian, plucked at one sleeve by his impatient uncle to "answer this

directly," and at the other by Cosmo to "explain for the love of God," he presented anything but a spectacle of dignity. Indeed, the situation was fast drifting into the ludicrous—as a situation will where of three actors, one is spluttering with rage, one struck stupid, and one does not understand what it all means.

From such a climax Cosmo rescued it.

"This must end," he said firmly. "Tell thine uncle, and mark well thyself the last words I shall speak to-night on this subject. Give me till noon to-morrow, and I will fully satisfy both. I will answer him then, and I will explain to thee why I may not do so now. I ask this for Desmond's sake—not for any purpose of mine own."

"But Willford will be here at noon," observed the goldsmith, when the ultimatum had been translated.

"Whatever happens, that man must be delayed," said Cosmo. "I saw him to-night."

"Indeed!" said Dick, getting suspicious, "where?"

"On board a ship in the river."

"Why, he lodges at the 'Bell,' in 'Cheap!"

"Art sure?"

"So mine uncle told me."

"Hast thine uncle seen him there?"

Referred to Martin Earle the reply to this question was in the negative, and then came the inevitable "What does he say?" which had better be left out for the future, and the rest of this conversation given as it was understood.

"I regret," Cosmo said, "that this man must be delayed. There is something dark going on in the ship he appears to command. Why should Master Willford of Manchester — the king's receiver — who gives us his abiding place a hostel in this city, be passing the night on board a ship in the river?"

"Did he recognise thee?"

"No, for we never met before."

"How then canst say he is the man?"

"He was addressed as Master Willford."

"'Tis not an uncommon name."

"No? Well, we can quickly see if there be two of them. Wilt help me?"

"Willingly," replied Dick. "What shall I do?"

"Come with me to the 'Bell,' and ask if he be there."

"'Tis late."

"The better for that. An he really lodge there, he will surely be in at this hour."

"Right. And if he be, we can state as an excuse for our visit, that mine uncle would fain postpone their meeting for a day."

"I don't see what you gain by that," said the goldsmith.

Cosmo mused for a while, and then answered—

"I can tell thee this much, good Master

Earle: not one stiver that ever belonged to Desmond should pass into this man's hands, and we must lose no chance for finding some weapon to fight him withal—delay, if he be not what I think, or fear of exposure if there exist a mystery on board that ship with which we can connect him."

The "Bell" in 'Cheap was kept by a buxom widow named Franklin, with whom handsome Dick was a favourite. Late as it was, she not only excused the invasion, but chided him for not having been to see her lately, brought out a flask of her best wine, and made her visitors welcome.

"Is Master Willford in?" she echoed, as Dick, having felt his way to his point, put the inquiry—"Ah! I thought thou didst not come for nothing."

"I came to show my friend here the handsomest hostess in London," said the gallant 'prentice; "but may not one ask a question?"

"Go to, flatterer! No; Master Willford takes a meal here now and again, but has

not slept in the house since he carried the poor gentleman away."

"What poor gentleman?"

"Why, his friend who is"—here she tapped her forehead.

"I see," said Dick: "out of his mind "Whither did he take him?"

"Nay, I know not. 'Tis no business of mine, and I was glad enough to be rid of him."

"'Tis not pleasant to have a madman in the house."

"Oh, poor creature! he gave little trouble. Shrieked out in his sleep sometimes, but in the main was quiet enough. I was right sorry for him. I hope Master Willford will send him back to his friends."

"At Manchester?"

"Lord, Dick! what would be the good of that? He comes all the way from Italy."

"From Italy!"

"Aye; his companion wanted to make him out a Spaniard, but I know better."

"How came they together?"

"Master Willford met him on the road, and took charge of him in charity, He would not admit that he was crazy at first, and—Lord! Lord! what a turn it gave me when I found it out."

"By his shrieking a-nights?" asked Dick.

"No. We were talking together in this very room one night. He speaks English well for a foreigner, and seemed quite rational till the clock struck eight. All of a sudden his face changed: 'She's coming!' he said—looking, oh! so wild; and then he began to talk in his own language to nothing that *I* could see: but I tell thee it made my blood run cold!"

"Was Willford present?"

"No; and when he did come I gave him my mind pretty freely—bringing a madman like that into an honest woman's house! I didn't know he was harmless then, and was for throwing them out presently."

"But you didn't."

"Willford spoke me fair, and overpersuaded me; promised to take him away as

soon as a place of disposal could be found: and they left last Monday."

"A strange story!" said Dick. "May I tell it to my friend?"

She assented, and it was told. Then that shriek and scuffle on board the ship flashed back upon Cosmo's mind. The madman was there, and Willford was his keeper. Who was he? An Italian, under the delusion that he was haunted by the spirit of a woman who appeared at eight o'clock at night. Why at eight o'clock?

"When he spoke, you say, so wildly," asked Dick, after a conference aside with Cosmo, "did he call the woman he thought he saw by any name?"

"None that I could catch," replied Mistress Franklin. "He spoke in Italian."

"How canst tell, not understanding him? Might it not have been Spanish? Willford said that he was a Spaniard."

"And I tell thee I know better, Master Dick."

"What difference could it make? Why

should he deceive thee?" persisted the 'prentice.

"I know not: there is some mystery about him."

"There is indeed. If thou wouldst but say frankly why thou dost persist he is from Italy."

"Bless the boy! Because he told me so."

"In his sane moments?"

"When he was as rational as art thou now."

"Good Mistress Franklin," said Dick, "I will not conceal from thee that what thou hast told us touches my friend nearly. He is from Italy, and is seeking a kinsman who disappeared not far from Manchester."

"Was he out of his mind?" she asked.

"No; not when last heard of."

"How long ago was that?"

"About a month."

"Willford said that this man had been so for years."

"Also that he was a Spaniard—which

thou dost not believe. The other tale may be false, too," urged Dick. "If your late guest be the man we seek, Master Willford has no right to control him, and can only seek to do so for some evil end."

"Vastly fine! Others may have evil ends, too," said the hostess, with a meaning glance towards Cosmo. "Have a care, Dick, that thou burnest not thy fingers in others' quarrels. Hearken!—this for thine own ear. The poor gentleman told me that he was persecuted, hunted from place to place by a kinsman, aided by a man whom he holds in the utmost dread."

"A common delusion," Dick said.

"I don't believe it is a delusion at all, Dick. Willford heard him say so, and added for himself, 'So you see, Mistress Franklin, we want to remain as quiet as possible.' What is he called?" she asked, quickly, as though struck by a sudden thought, and indicating Cosmo.

"Signor Pietri," replied Dick.

"That was not the name he mentioned."

"Dost remember what it was?" asked the 'prentice.

"Well; 'twas Cosmo de Ribolini."

"And the other man—he who aids him—what is his name?" cried Dick.

"Hugh Desmond," replied the hostess.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MAD!

YES, Vincenti Della Torre was mad! His mind had been bent in one direction, preyed upon by one idea for years, but in his darkest moments, his gloomiest moods, no desire for revenge upon the girl whom, in his way, he had loved, and who had sought refuge from him in the arms of another, entered it. Nor did he allow himself to consider that in killing Desmond he would take the sunshine out of her life. If Desmond had fifty lives he could have slain him fifty times, and felt no regret, but not a hair of

her head would he have injured. It was really more to provide for her future, than for the reason he gave in his letter to the old count, that he desired Cosmo's presence in England. He knew how this brother and sister loved one another. He had no fear that Cosmo would be hard upon her. It could be so arranged that she should not be aware of his complicity in her husband's execution, and so would naturally accept his protection. The dark cloud which came over Vincenti when he found that the young noble was false to his mission, had its glint of silver lining reflected from this very cause. She would have her brother to provide for her when Desmond should fall. We know what befel his long-laid plans—how his vengeance was averted. The shot which killed Sweetheart inflicted a mortal wound upon his reason. By a strange fatality he owed his life to the suspension of the faculties which had often protected it. Stunned with horror, he rushed back into the house, where Gregory headed him

in the wood. This was the last place in which, had he been in possession of his senses, he would have sought to hide, but it so happened that it was the last place which his pursuers thought of searching. During their absence he somewhat recovered from the shock; released Marco; stole little Hugh out of his cot; and escaped. If Cosmo had not lost his way, he would have encountered him.

His reason had received a mortal wound, but like some injuries from which there is no recovery, it did not seem severe when the first sting had passed off. This—if he had but known it—was the worst sign. In time there came others which he could not ignore. The clock had struck eight the moment before he fired, and every night at that hour the *horror* came back upon him, dimly at first, but gaining vividness at each repetition. He was going mad, *and he knew it!* His mania was of that class—well understood now—in which the sane and the insane thought run side by

side; not in parallel lines, but at an angle which must sooner or later lead them to converge in absolute madness. Like one who struggles on the verge of a precipice, and feels the branches to which he clings slowly but surely giving way with his weight, and fully realizing the utter destuction which awaits him when they shall break, and his weakening hold upon them relax—he fought with his delusion, and knew that his strength to resist it was failing—failing—failing. The horror which at one time lasted but for a few minutes, now remained with him all night. The day was coming when it would never leave him.

His great dread was that Desmond would find him when under its influence. Vincenti *sane* tortured himself with conjectures as to what would become of Vincenti *mad* in the presence of the man he had desolated. This alone was hurrying on the end, until the news of Desmond's death, which enabled him to revisit Man-

chester and put him in the power of Master Willford, relieved him.

He had parted with Marco whilst he could yet bear to be alone, and soon began to cling to the witch-finder with almost child-like dependence, but had sufficient cunning left to avoid anything like a confession of the cause of his terrors. He never told him that he was haunted by the spirit of a woman at eight o'clock, nor could his companion gather the trnth from his cries at night and mutterings in his sleep. It mattered little to Willford what was preying on his mind; what did matter was to find out all he knew about Desmond's affairs, and to get possssion of those papers abstracted from the old brewhouse, which tended to show that what he said on the subject was not founded on delusion.

Little by little he gained his point; found out about the deposit made with Martin Earle, and the house and land in Staffordshire, but by this time Vincenti's darkening intellect was thrown off its

guard, and the plotter learned that this wealth was not for him. Desmond had left a son!

This discovery might have daunted a smaller villain—it only suggested one more possible difficulty to Stephen Willford. I say "possible difficulty," because, according to Vincenti's story, the child had been carried off with instructions to obliterate every trace of his identity. Who knew of his existence? Not Martin Earle, or he would have mentioned it when the claim of the Crown for Desmond's property became known to him. Not Dame Martha, for she was dead. Who would assert the boy's legitimacy? Not Cosmo de Ribolini, for he made no sign. "Perhaps," mused the witch-finder, "this is only a new delusion." At all events, he resolved to treat it as one.

Having no further use for the wretched Vincenti, the next thing to be done was to get rid of him. For a consideration he induced the captain of the ship we know

of to take charge of him, and to lose him at some distant port when his mind should have entirely given way, and no one would be likely to heed what he might say.

In order to hasten this end, he was represented as a dangerous lunatic, and treated accordingly—chained in the dark, starved, beaten. That was the way in which the mentally affected were kept quiet in the *good old days.* Perhaps he might never reach that distant port.

* * * * *

Master Willford was punctual at his appointment with the goldsmith, and quickly detected that there was something wrong.

Could the jovial old fellow, who was sitting back in his chair, his face radiant with smiles, and a chuckle running all over him, from his toes to the roots of his hair, be the grave merchant who with dim eyes and softened voice had conversed with him about Hugh Desmond—his good friend departed—yesterday? Master Willford

could not make it out. Moreover, the goldsmith made no sign of going forth with him, of retiring to a private room, or dismissing the two men whom he had found in his company; but sat there talking about things in general in the best of humours.

Now Master Willford knew perfectly well that Hugh Desmond's savings were in Earle's own hands; and his knowledge of human nature did not teach him that people give up such deposits at short notice, and in the best of humours. The conversation—which turned upon the new practice of smoking tobacco — was animated. The goldsmith laughed to scorn the idea that any pleasure was to be obtained from drawing the smoke of old leaves into one's mouth and puffing it out again; while Dick took the practical view—confessed that he had indulged in a pipe, and found it soothing.

The subject did not interest Master Willford, and when it began to flag he touched the goldsmith's arm, and with a meaning

glance towards Dick and Cosmo, said in a half whisper,

"When I saw thee yesterday, good sir, it was my fortune to find thee alone."

"Aye, Dick was busy. Dick here is my nephew and my 'prentice, Master Willford. Knows all my business as well as I know it myself. A young head, but a shrewd one if he muddle it not with the fumes of Sir Walter's Virginia weed. Thou mayest speak frankly before Dick, and this fair gentleman (a foreigner, who honours my poor house by making it his home during his too brief sojourn here). He does not understand our language; I would he did, for he is a good friend of Master Desmond; so also is Dick—both good friends."

"It pleases me to hear that he had friends," Willford replied.

"*Had!*" repeated Martin Earle. "Say *has*. Once a *good* friend always a good friend. Friendship and sound wine improve by age."

"Mayhap this gentleman (intimating

Cosmo) is he to whom thou didst make allusion yesterday, as one who could tell where the estate of the deceased is disposed ?" insinuated Willford.

"Enough of this," replied Earle, with a cheerful wave of his hand. "Thou hast made a great mistake, Master Receiver—honestly, I hope. Desmond is no more dead than thou art."

The cold grey of the witch-finder's face deepened for a moment.

"I am here on the King's business, Master Earle," he said sternly. "I pray thee spare thy jests."

"Jests ! I' faith, there is no jest unless it be of thy making—coming here after the estate of an honest gentleman before it has pleased God Almighty to take the breath out of his mouth !" retorted the goldsmith with some warmth.

Willford made no immediate reply. He sat for some moments irresolute. Twice he made as though to speak, and twice he checked himself. Then his face curdled into

the nearest approach to a smile that it was capable of assuming, and drawing his chair nearer to Martin Earle, he said,

"We are both men of the world; let us be frank with each other. I know that thou hast some fifty thousand crowns which belonged to Desmond in thine hands; and 'tis easy to comprehend that so large a sum —invested perchance in thy business—may not suddenly be withdrawn without inconvenience. Fear not, good Master Earle. Those who act in this matter will not be hard on thee. Thou shalt have time. Thou shalt have thy charges. Accounts from such a man as thee will require no scrutiny. Thy simple word will pass. What canst ask more! Go to! go to! Why didst thou not treat me frankly, instead of making an idle excuse which can avail thee nothing, and would bring thy good fame in peril."

"Speak of what thou dost understand, Master Witchfinder!" roared Dick, furious at the insinuation conveyed against his

master. "The good fame of Martin Earle is out of thy reach."

"Hush Dick—hold thy peace, my boy," said his uncle, kindly. "I was perchance to blame, sir," he continued, addressing Willford, "in that I told thee of my friends being yet alive, without due gravity. I had only just heard the news myself, and was glad—very glad. I was too happy to be grave, and thou art excused for deeming that I jested. Believe me, I am in sober earnest now. I tell thee, Master Willford —I, Martin Earle, citizen and goldsmith, master of my guild, and one who (an his neighbours do not flatter him) will be Lord Mayor of this city if he live two years—I tell thee that malgre all thy depositions, thy proceedings and thy judgments to the contrary; Hugh Desmond *did not* perish in the fire of his house, and was alive yesterday."

Earnest words these, and delivered with much dignity.

Dick jumped up, slapped his thigh, and

confronted Master Willford with the—"now then! what can you say to that?"—air of the triumphant. But he saw no trace of discomfiture on the countenance of the witch-finder. Honest Martin Earle had said too much. In his anxiety to clear up everything he had made an admission in the commencement of his speech, which took all the force out of its conclusion.

"You are a solid man and true," Willford replied. "I doubt not thy honesty or thy word, but, good sir, thou dost not speak of thine own knowledge. Yesterday thou hadst no doubt of Desmond's death. Thou dost admit having only just heard the news that he is—as some one has told thee—alive. Who is thine informant? How came he by his news? Above all, if the man be living, where is he? The proceedings taken on behalf of his Majesty (whom heaven preserve!) have not been taken in the dark. Due proclamation has been made—all proper notice given. Again I say, where is Desmond?"

"He is living in Southwark," Dick replied; for the goldsmith had fallen back in his seat, and had cast a half-puzzled, half-appealing look at him. "This gentleman" (indicating Cosmo) "was returning from his lodging, when thou wast so good as to give him a scull in place of one broken by the waterman who rowed him. He hopes that his afflicted countryman, whom thou hast in charge, passed a tranquil night."

Willford's panoply of cunning and caution could not resist this shot. It went home, through and through, and struck him speechless—stunned him, so that it was some time before he perceived that his question had been evaded.

"I rejoice," he muttered, with pale, dry lips, "at having been of service to a friend of this house. For the rest, it is a painful subject: let it pass. I pray thee to satisfy me on the point more german to my business. Did the gentleman to whom I gave

the scull know of my visit here yesterday, and of its object?"

"He knew of this visit and guessed its object," Dick answered.

"Ha! And said nothing?"

"He had not permission to say anything; on the contrary, he was bound to silence."

"By Desmond himself?"

"By Desmond himself," repeated Dick.

"The purport of his visit, therefore, was to inform that person of what was going on?"

"Most assuredly it was."

"A friendly act," said Willford, with a sigh of relief, "and well timed. Why, an I had persisted yesterday, thy good master might have made over to me these monies out of hand! Was this gentleman (whose name I have not the honour of knowing) aware that I was to return to-day and claim them?"

"He thought that there was no time to be lost," said Dick; "and he was right."

"May I venture to ask how Master Desmond accounts for his taking no steps to gainsay the rumour of his death?"

"Thou canst ask him thyself."

"I would fain do so," said Willford. "Where is he?"

"That he will make known at his pleasure," Dick replied after a slight pause, in which Willford's quick sense detected hesitation and uneasiness.

"Doubtless I weary thee, good youth, with this questioning. Remember that the law exacts a shrewd account from such as I, and bear with me. Say frankly—as is thy nature—dost *thou* vouch that Desmond lives?"

"Aye; that do I."

"Upon thine own knowledge?"

"I do, upon my soul, believe it."

"But thy belief is based on trust in others?"

"Well, an they be honest, what then?" said Dick, stoutly.

"The most honest may be mistaken,

Master 'Prentice. The honester, the more liable to be deceived. Briefly, then, thou hast no knowlege of thine own, and can say no more than what this foreigner has told thee."

"That is enough for me; but I have other proof—the people of the house in which Desmond lodges."

"Ha! thou hast also been there?"

Dick assented.

"Not last night?"

Wilford assented, with more quickness than he had as yet shown.

"Thou wast not in the boat. Thou hast been there together this day."

"What if I have?" Dick retorted.

"This," said Willford, triumphantly: "neither thou nor this stranger have seen Hugh Desmond."

"Easily said," sneered Dick; but he turned deadly pale.

"As easily proved," Willford rejoined. "If this stranger had seen him last night, one of two things would have happened—

either there would have been no need for a further visit, or Desmond would have tarried in to-day to receive it. Thou didst not see him nor yesterday nor to-day, or thou wouldst not have given for what thou wert pleased to call thy 'proof' the people of the house in which—as thou pretendest—he doth lodge. Master Earle, have a care! Thou art deceived. Thou hast heard what I have just said to this youth. He cannot answer me. Look upon him! The Lord has assisted me to baffle this plot—blessed be his name! Get thee out of it, good Master Earle; shake its dust from thy garments, and no blame shall fall on thee. Thou hast been cozened. Fie! thou a master of thy guild, and one who may be lord mayor! 'Tis a shame, 'tis a pity!"

"To the devil with thy pity, and thee!" cried the goldsmith in a fury. "Hugh Desmond lives, though we cannot find him at this moment, and will confront thee yet."

"As I supposed," said Willford, with a sardonic smile. "It grieves me that thou shouldst take this tone, Master Earle. Thou wilt think better of it upon consideration. Take council of thy *friends*. This," gathering up his papers and rising, "must now go into the hands of those who will not, perchance, be as easy as I might have been."

"Stop," cried Dick; "give us three days to prove that Desmond lives."

"No; nor three hours."

"Come with us to his lodgings, then, and satisfy thyself. Thou dost hesitate. Ah! then thou dost not believe in thine own base imputations."

"I will go with thee," he replied. "I will leave thee no excuse."

Down to the river they went—Cosmo, Dick, and Master Willford; and on the hard whom should they encounter but John Trumble, the waterman, who drew Dick aside, and said—

"Hast any business with that ship thou wast asking about this morning?"

"You said that she had sailed."

"So she did; but she was stopped at Greenwich, and came back with the tide."

"Why? Who stopped her?"

"I don't rightly know, but there's a rare coil aboard. There she lies, with the warden's boat alongside; so take warning if thou hast hand in the trouble."

"Nay, 'tis no affair of mine," Dick replied; "but I would fain learn what it means. Say not a word, but row us to her as though it were on our way across."

To inland-born Master Willford one ship was just like another. The only vessel in which he was interested had left the port (as he supposed), and was well on her way down the Thames. It did not therefore concern him to find that they were passing close by a ship with half-furled sails, until a voice hailed him in excited tones, shouting—

"I am seized! I am ruined, Master Willford. They have taken my ship!"

"Upon whose authority?" gasped the witch-finder.

"On mine," replied a calm, deep voice from the poop.

The speaker was Hugh Desmond.

CHAPTER XIX.

A GOOD SAMARITAN.

YOU can guess now why Hugh Desmond was not to be found at his lodgings. The clue which accident had revealed to Cosmo, he had discovered by long and patient search amongst the shipping in the port and the sea-faring people on shore. Half a sailor himself, he knew well how to gain the confidence and loosen the tongues of men of the sea. From sunrise to sunset he was amongst them, listening to their yarns, spinning yarns of his own, and cautiously pushing his inquiries.

The clue was but a slight one, after all. A crazy foreigner had been taken on board a certain ship, whose skipper did not bear the best of characters. No more! The man he sought was not crazy, so far as he knew; but then, madness might be assumed as a *ruse.* He worked on the back trail of that crazy foreigner like a hungry sleuth-hound, till he found out who he was. He had succeeded at last. He had the murderer of Sweetheart—the robber of her boy in his hands at last; and despair seized him. He was powerless. He could not fight a madman—he could not kill a madman—he could not ask a madman, "Where is my child?"

Well, there was yet hope. The man Marco might be mixed up in this, and *he* was sane.

He could find no trace of Marco. His enemy, the Manchester witch-finder, was the man who had ridden into London with Vincenti Della Torre, who had put him on board that ship, and who had given its

master instructions how he was to be dealt with when she sailed. But why Willford? What interest had he in spiriting the witch away? This puzzled Desmond at first, but eventually gave him the pretext he required for stopping the ship. He swore out an information against the captain for kidnapping, just in the nick of time. He took one constable, for form's sake, and half-a-dozen sailors, willing for what we should now call the "lark of the thing" to help him; and in about four minutes that ship was boarded, her crew battened down below, and her captain a prisoner, in the best buccaneering style, with a loss of some ounce or so of blood, chiefly from the nose.

At first the captain stoutly denied having any passenger on board. His cargo was lawful, his papers were in order. He would have the law on them all for detaining him. Desmond paid no attention to his expostulations or his threats, but made straight for his cabin in the stern, unfastened the screws which held his cot to

the bulwark, threw aside some sacking which covered the deck underneath, disclosed a trap-door, raised it, and descended into the dark hold below.

There he found what he sought.

They had taken a broad plank and bound the wretched madman by his middle to its midst with six turns of a stout rope. They had driven four strong iron spikes into the edge of the plank—two above and two below—and to these had lashed his wrists and ankles. *At the lower end they had fastened a fifty pound shot.* And there they had left him, gagged, in the darkness, in the stench of the bilge water, in the suffocating heat of that dismal hole, until the time and the place should be arrived at when that shot should carry him down to the bottom of the sea! Dead, if death came to his rescue; living, if need be.

Thus was Vincenti Della Torre found by the man who had been hunting him for vengeance! Emaciated, filthy, blood oozing

from ears and nostrils, cut by the lashings he had vainly tried to break, almost at his last gasp of foul air, *but sane,* he found him!

It was best to lift him as he lay, first casting loose the shot, and to carry him, plank and all, to the upper air. With his own hands Desmond removed the gag and cut the lashings, and so weak was the wretch that, deprived of their support, he collapsed a helpless heap upon the deck, muttering, "Water! for the love of God, water!"

Desmond filled the ship's pannikin, and held it to his lips.

The draught and the fresh river breeze revived him. He recognised his deliverer, as a wild beast caught in a trap sees the hunter who has set it come up with his dogs. But gradually the look of horror, hatred, and despair faded from his face, and an almost childish expression of wonder filled it.

"Why do *you* do this?" he whispered.

Ah, why, indeed? Desmond could not answer, but turned aside and left him to the charge of the crew, now released. Let me do them justice. They had come on board at the last moment before sailing, and were not aware of *this* part of the cargo. There was no difficulty now about bringing back the ship. Her seamen, who at first seemed disposed to resist the authorities, soon sided with them. They would not sail with such a —— pirate. Upon this the "pirate" (qualifying adjective suppressed) gave in, and split upon his master.

How was he, a poor mariner, to know that the gentleman (meaning Willford) had not the law on his side? They had put the crazy man down there to keep him quiet whilst the ship was getting ready for sea, that was all. No harm was meant him, but he was so violent. And the shot—well, he called heaven and all its saints to witness that he had not put it there.

Now in swearing out that information, Hugh Desmond deposed that Willford had no right to the custody or control of the alleged madman, and that he was being sent out of the realm without the knowledge or consent of his nearest relative in this country, and head of his family abroad, the Count de Ribolini, and this person Desmond pledged himself to produce within an hour of the ship's return to London.

As good luck would have it, he was able to produce him much sooner; and not only him, but the principal in the kidnapping, good Master Willford.

The warden had not been on board ten minutes when all the parties were before him, and Desmond's statement substantiated to the very letter.

Such a complete break up of his schemes was not to be realized all at once by even so astute a plotter as the Manchester witch-finder. He knew not how much had been discovered, but the appearance of Hugh Desmond on the scene gave him clearly to

understand that a change of tactics was required. So as soon as Dick stopped the boat and insisted upon all going on board, he assumed the injured innocent. Accused of kidnapping! Heavens! what an indignity! What a reward for his charity to a poor unfortunate, without kith or kin to help him! He had found him on the road, out of his mind, had taken care of him, lodged him, fed him, provided him at his own expense (here he gave a meaning look at the captain) with a passage home to his country and friends, and this they called kidnapping! "Ah!" he moaned piously, "it is a punishment for my sins! 'Whom the Lord loveth he chastiseth!' Verily, there rose a hard thought in my heart, that I would ne'er play the good Samaritan again. But I do repent me of it; I am in the hands of the Lord. I will do the Lord's work. I am not afraid of what man may do unto me; but have a care! have a care, I say! I am the king's officer, and the bishop's."

These last words, somewhat inconsistent with the holy resignation which had marked the commencement of the sentence, were spoken from white lips and a shrinking form, for Desmond, who had been aside with Cosmo, came forward somewhat suddenly, and confronted him. His fears were groundless. Desmond was not going to strike him—at least, not with his hands—or to cause him any bodily harm. On the contrary, he was going to build him a golden bridge of escape out of the clutches of Master Warden and the constables.

"Most Christian sir," he began, with a low bow, "'twould be sad indeed if such charity as thou hast rendered should not meet with its reward. Doubt not, good sir, that thy conduct will surely be rewarded here or hereafter. But forgive me, if I say that thou hast committed some errors. A man—no matter what his condition may be—is not to be hustled out of this realm with less warrant than is due for a bale of merchandise. Eh, Master Warden? Now,

hadst thou attempted even to find some friends or fellow-countrymen of the poor soul to whom thou hast been the good Samaritan, or, failing these, hadst warned some justice of what thou didst propose to do, all might have been well. Am I right, Master Warden? Good! It only remains, therefore, for this gentleman—a nobleman of Italy, and the nearest of kin to Señor Porras in this country, to relieve thee of thy charge, and also to withdraw the more serious accusation which has been made—not by us, I pray thee mark—not by us, but by this somewhat excited Master Mariner—against thee; to repay thee the monies of which thou hast spoken, and to bid thee—an Master Warden so wills it—go in peace."

"Vastly fine!" replied Willford, upon whom the fine irony of Desmond's words was lost, and who only saw in their calm what he took for weakness. "Vastly fine! but let me also tell thee that in this realm false accusations——"

He had got thus far when the captain passed close beside him, and whispered in his ear—

"Hist! He knows all. Submit, or you are lost."

"That is precisely," Willford resumed, but with a shade less confidence in his tone, "what I was about to say. Thou" (to the captain) "art the most offended, and if *thou* art content—well, let it be as this worthy gentleman desires. *I* (thanks be to the Lord) am too well known—*my* character amongst men is too high, for such a charge, so lightly made, to injure me. My friends" (holding up his hands as though giving his benediction) "I forgive you—all. May God soften your hearts, so that you may see, and praise His works. I have cast my bread upon the waters, and it will return to me. Was not something said of money? I have expended some forty crowns, less the sum paid for my afflicted friend's passage in this ship, and which—as perchance he will not be allowed to go

in her—this honest mariner will refund. But this is between ourselves," he added, as he saw a look upon the honest mariner's face which he did not like, "and need not trouble you."

Long before this, Vincenti had been taken below. Good Master Warden was not informed of the plight in which he had been found, and consequently accepted the compromise, the more readily as he had not the vaguest idea what else he ought to do. So his fees were paid, and the ship released.

Why were the guilty allowed to go thus unpunished? Not out of pity or affection, you may be sure. There were two reasons for compromise, savouring more of the wisdom of the serpent than the softness of the dove. Cosmo de Ribolini wished for his own sake to hush up a business which, once submitted to investigation, might produce disastrous disclosures; and, for Desmond's sake, he was glad to have a hold over Willford. Besides, in the good old

days they were not particular about compounding felonies.

The sailors, to whom the victim was a poor, foreignering — never mind what— were very good—aye, even tender, in their way, to Vincenti. They washed him, clothed him, dressed his sores, slapped him on the back (rather too warmly), and told him to "cheer up." They brought him, besides, some of their own dinners, a supply of tobacco, rum, apples, and other delicacies as refreshment, a fiddle for his amusement, and the ship's cat for company.

Some of these good fellows had known or heard of Desmond, and thought they were obliging him by these attentions. Had he called upon them to keel-haul Willford and the skipper, it would certainly have been done. But now, to their deep disgust, Willford and the skipper had been allowed to go about their business. There was no one to be keel-hauled, and nothing to do except to talk it all over; which they did, as sailors will—each one

telling the others what they all knew, and then in turn listening to the old story, *da capo.*

At last some one struck out a new line, and said it was a past-participled shame, and that he would be the reverse of blessed if he sailed with such a pirate. He had received an advance of ten crowns on his share of the voyage; but that he did not mention. The idea took, and very soon Desmond and Cosmo were left alone with the rescued man on board.

As the "honest mariner" left the ship, he found something. He found it on the main deck, where the struggle had taken place between his crew and Desmond's men at Greenwich. He struck it with his foot by accident, and it jingled; so he stooped down, as though to coil a rope out of the way, picked it up furtively, and put it in his pocket. It was an iron key, the haft fantastically shaped like an anchor entwined with sea-weed.

* * * * *

When Master Warden and his men had left, and Dick with them, to tell Martin Earle the news, Cosmo took Desmond aside, and whispered—

"Where is he? Hast seen him?"

"He is in the cabin. Yes, I have seen him, and he recognized me."

"He was sane then?"

"Sane!"

"Dost not know that he has his lucid intervals?"

Desmond did not, and Cosmo's account of what had been told Dick by the landlady of "The Bell," raised a spark of hope in his breast. He might yet ask, "Where is my child?"

He now remembered the strange change of expression which had passed over his rescued enemy's face as he held the water to his parched lips. Was it possible that, softened by suffering, and grateful for escape from a horrible death, he might restore little Hugh? It did seem possible to Desmond; for he felt that the fierce craving

for vengeance which at first had filled his own heart had cooled, and was fading away. What good, he began to think, would Vincenti's blood do him? Would it bring back the light into Sweetheart's eyes? Would it revive the home she brightened? Would it restore her boy? So he saved his life; and when Cosmo had told him of his visions and his remorse, "Surely," thought Desmond, "there is an end now."

There was no end. In his sane moments Vincenti Della Torre hated Hugh Desmond more bitterly than ever:—hated him because he had escaped his revenge—hated him because Sweetheart had died to save him—hated him for having saved his own life—and hated him the more for having spared it afterwards. It was, perhaps, this last cause which irritated him the most. He was to be spared because he was mad! When lifted out of the hold into the light, the first objects which met his bewildered gaze were Desmond's face and the flash of

a knife. He half gasped a prayer when the knife fell—not on his heart, but on the cruel cords which bound him. There was wonder—nothing but wonder—in his question, "Why do *you* do this?" He could not understand why one should not shoot his enemy from an ambush, or stab him from behind, or fall upon him when he was bound, and kill him. As his strength came back, he thought that there was something ignominious in his escape. He had been spared because he was mad! The idea struck at the sane portions of his brain, or at those mysterious influences which gave him lucid intervals, and weakened them.

When Desmond and Cosmo entered the cabin they found him seated by one of the stern ports, gazing moodily at the water.

"You here!" he cried, as he recognized the latter. "Whose prisoner, then, am I —thine or his?"

"For thy protection thou art in my charge, but not as a prisoner," said Cosmo.

"Why am I kept here?"

"Thou shalt be removed anon."

"Whither?"

"That is not yet decided."

"But it lies in thy decision?"

"Doubtless."

"Then do I call upon thee, Comte de Ribolini, as kinsman, as knight, as fellow noble, to stand by me. I charge thee, by all that is holy, just, and honourable, to be true to thy name and thine order. I am forced, for a moment, to be false to mine, and treat yon buccaneer as mine equal. All I ask of thee is what thou art bound to grant—a fair field."

Desmond folded his arms, and heard all this with a smile of pity and contempt.

"Answer him," he said to Cosmo, "as we determined."

"I will do all for thee that knight and noble may," Cosmo answered.

"And as kinsman?" Vincenti demanded eagerly.

"Thou shalt have justice—even from a kinsman whom thou hast so deeply wronged."

"By force of an accident—an awful, utterly unforeseen accident! But thou! thou didst deceive thy father—thou didst deceive me. Thou didst take the part of yon gutter-blood against the dictates of thy race, the principles of thine order. Wronged! thou wronged! But listen! Protect me from that—that bloodless, passionless statue there, of murder, and all shall be forgiven."

"He saved thy life."

"Only to take it when it should be sweeter to me."

"Let this end," said Desmond, with a gesture of ineffable scorn. "I give thee thy life."

"Hearest thou that?" asked Cosmo.

"Aye," muttered Vincenti; "but there is something behind. They spared my life when they bound me in that den" (he shuddered as he pointed with averted eyes to the trap-door in the deck). "Oh, yes! they left me my *life*—that was the cruelty! A dagger-stroke would have been a mercy.

How do I know through what torture this man, who says so glibly 'I give thee life,' will make me drag it?"

"I mean thee no harm," said Desmond.

"For to-day?"

"For ever."

"Why?"

"Because God has taken thy punishment out of my hands. I pity and forgive thee."

"Ha! you think I am stricken mad! So I am—I am mad sometimes—but not now—not for many hours every day. Flatter not thy soul that thou canst pity and forgive because I am mad. If thou dost, thou art a coward and a knave. Pity me? Forgive me? Hypocrite! what hast thou done to me in comparison to that I have wrought against thee? And thinkest thou that *I* could pity—*I* could forgive? Never. Thou liest, saying, 'I mean thee no harm.' Let me gain a little strength. Give me but till to-morrow. Restore me my sword, and grant me a fair fight for my life—*or thine.*"

"What dost thou know of 'fair fight?'"

retorted Desmond, stung by his taunts—"thou mean assassin! I will not fight with thee," he added after a pause, in which he recovered his calmness.

"Coward!" hissed Vincenti through his clenched teeth.

Desmond had turned to leave the cabin, for he saw clearly that it was hopeless to ask the questions which were burning in his breast. He had done more harm than good in accompanying Cosmo. The idea that suffering and remorse had softened, or could soften, such an one as Vincenti Della Torre, must be abandoned. Some other agency had to be sought, or some other chord struck. Desmond had turned to leave the cabin, but the word "coward" checked him. The speaker's face was livid with rage. Twice he tried to rise, and throw himself upon the object of his defiance; and twice he sank, writhing in impotent fury. "There is more than anger here," mused Desmond, "and I may turn it to use."

"Signor Vincenti Della Torre," he said aloud, advancing so near as to be able to fix him well with his eye, "till now, an it please thee, what manner of man is a coward?"

"Such as thou art."

"Nay; that is not a reply."

"A coward is one who dares not fight at equal vantage."

"Good. Can we fight at equal vantage?"

"The vantage is on thy side, but I waive it. Thou art well and strong; I but lately at death's door."

"It would verily be a coward act to slay a fainting man."

"Wait but ten days, and, good swordsman as thou mayest be, thou shalt not easily hold thine own."

"Let us anticipate these ten days. Let us suppose that thou art recovered. Thou hast thy strength, thy reason, and thy sword. Our duel is to the death."

"To the death," reiterated Vincenti, with flashing eyes.

"There is no need for witnesses."

"None."

"We meet in some place where we cannot be disturbed."

"Agreed."

"We have our swords, and, should they fail, our daggers."

"I will take back the insult I flung in thy teeth," cried Vincenti. "Thou art no coward—go on."

"We stand face to face upon the sod beneath which one of us must find a grave, if, indeed, the other have life enough left to bury him."

"Talk not of burial; I will leave thy carcass there for the dogs and the kites."

"Ah! thou dost fully realize the position?"

"I do—fully."

"Now listen. My foot has slipped, and I am at thy mercy. By some trick of fence thou hast disarmed me, or so got within my guard so that my breast is open to thy sword. One spring, one thrust, and thy

hilt would be at my ribs, thy blade through my heart."

"There it should rust!" he hissed.

"Signor Vincenti Della Torre," said Desmond, sinking his voice, "what has happened once may happen again."

"I do not understand thee now."

"Once before I was at thy mercy as much as I have just pictured."

"Once before," muttered Vincenti, growing deadly pale.

"Once before. Thy aim sure, thy match burning, thy finger on the wheel. Bethink thee. Now, in fancy, thou hast thy point at my heart. Answer me. WHAT WOULD COME BETWEEN US?"

He threw up his arms with a wild cry. "HER BOSOM, AS IT DID BEFORE!" and fell fainting upon the deck.

CHAPTER XX.

TOGETHER.

"'WAS ill done!" exclaimed Cosmo, angrily, as he knelt beside the prostrate form of his kinsman, and lifted his head from the deck. "Thou hast maddened him."

"There was no reason in his sanity," Desmond replied. "There may be in his madness. Let this work, I pray thee. There are strong waters in this case bottle. Give him some, and when he revives, encourage him to speak of—of her. He will, when alone with thee."

"I do mistrust thy plan greatly; but——"

"Ah, brother, bear with me yet awhile. Who has more to lose by it than I?"

Cosmo was disarmed. "Be it as thou wilt," he said.

"And thou wilt tell me all that passes?"

"Every word."

"Good news or bad?"

"Every word."

"Thy hand on it."

The autumn day was almost gone as Desmond returned to the upper deck. He paced up and down in the twilight, shaken to his last nerve with hope and fear. Rover, buccaneer, dabbler in unlawful arts as he was, prayer came strange to him. He knew no formula for invoking God's help. He did not fall on his knees with the heart-weary cry of the publican in the temple, but his whole soul went up in supplication. His little Hugh, his first-born, his only son, whom he had fondly pictured as the pride of the autumn, the prop of the winter, of his life. Had the Father of

Mercies defended the child? Would He speak by the mouth of his mother's murderer? "Oh, my darling! my darling!" he cried; "if thy pure spirit may do aught in this weary, wicked world, help me—help me to our child! Take all my rebellious thoughts, all the reproaches wrung from me in my misery against thy God. Lay them with these repentant tears at *His* feet, and add thy prayers to mine!"

Down in the cabin Cosmo had little difficulty in restoring his kinsman to consciousness, but it was some time before he spoke. He suffered himself to be raised and helped to a seat. He passively swallowed the liquor which Desmond had left for him, without a word on his own account, or in reply to Cosmo's questions. When he did speak he went straight back to what was passing at the moment when he fell.

"No," he said, as though summing up the result of a long self-examination, "I was wrong. I did not think of that. He is no coward. 'Twould verily be so. I

could not kill him—she would not let me kill him. She would die again to save his life."

"None but a good and tender heart could win such love as that," Cosmo observed, mindful of his promise to lead him on.

"Bah! women are like dogs: they lick the hand that strikes them."

"Not the women of our race, cousin. My sister loved her husband because he was brave, and kind, and true. What more could any man be? Bethink thee what sort of spouses the ladies of our land are compelled to endure, and then ask thyself what right had we to blame her?"

"She has brought a taint into our blood," replied Vincenti, sullenly.

"Would to God that the veins of every noble Italian family were invigorated by the blood of such men as Hugh Desmond," said Cosmo; "there would be less lying and craft; more true courage and manhood then."

"He is a wizard—he has bewitched thee!"

"Foolish words! A wizard! Were he such, what would have become of thee? Thou wouldst never have escaped him as thou didst—with the child."

"Ah! I have him there!" Vincenti muttered with eyes that flashed a wild light. "I cannot have his life, but I can take out of it half its delight, and all of our disgrace. Would that I could have carried them both away; but the girl"—his voice sunk at this point—"the girl was with *her* where they laid her; oh, so white! so white! with the red spot over her heart. We had the boy then, or——"

"Where is he now?"

"Ah, where?" replied Vincenti, relapsing into dreamy gloom.

"But surely," Cosmo eagerly began, "he lives; you cannot have——. Tell me that he lives."

"Yes, I think he lives."

"*Think!*"

"I am well nigh sure he lives. Marco took him when we separated. It seems years ago, but it cannot well be so long. Marco took him into Scotland, and—I will tell thee why I think he lives. If he were dead, *she* would know it. He would be with her when she comes."

"Hast heard from Marco?"

"Once only; just before he sailed for Italy."

"He has returned then?"

"Yes. He wished me to join him, but I—I met with Master Willford, and he brought me here."

"But the boy—is he with Marco?"

"With Marco!" Vincenti echoed, dreamily.

"Repeat not my question, but answer it. Where is the boy?"

"I know not."

"Is he with Marco?"

"No."

"Then where has he been disposed?

What has been done with him?" demanded Cosmo.

"I will not tell thee," replied his kinsman, moodily. "Press me no more; this questioning vexes me. Am I to be kept for ever in this cursed ship? Where is Desmond?"

"On deck."

"It is getting late; remove me as thou promised. Whither are we to go?"

"To the house of one Martin Earle, my friend."

"Here in London?"

"Not a mile from where we are."

"Is this Martin Earle known to Desmond?"

"Well known."

"Does he, too, lodge in his house?"

"That I cannot answer with certainty. Perhaps he may go there now."

"Then will I not. Take me back to the hotel whence I came."

"Thou wouldst not be received there."

"Because I am sometimes mad? Kins-

man, have mercy upon me. Take me somewhere where Desmond cannot come."

"He has given his word not to harm thee; he will keep it."

"I do believe him. He will not wittingly harm me; but—listen to me, Cosmo de Ribolini. I am not mad now. I soon shall be. I dread these two together."

"What two?"

"He and—and the one who is dead."

"What converse can the living have with the dead?"

"I know not. I only know how the dead can move the living. If *she*, moved by some influence of his, were to demand her child, what could I do! Merciful heaven! what could I do?"

As he spoke, the perspiration stood in heavy beads upon his pale forehead, and a cold shudder shook him to his centre. As he spoke, the man whose life he had made desolate was looking up to heaven, half-blinded by his tears, and crying—

"Oh, my darling! my darling! help me to our child!"

Cosmo now saw how right Desmond had been in assailing this man through his delusion—or what they both believed to be a delusion—and quickly followed up the advantage he had gained.

"What couldst do?" he repeated. "There can be no doubt on that score. Appease her troubled spirit by restoring the boy to his father."

"I cannot. It is too late," Vincenti groaned.

"Lay thy commands upon Marco to disclose where he has left him, and I will find and restore him."

"It is too late. For the love of God!" gasped Vincenti, "get me out of this ship before the night sets in. Something is closing in around me different to all that I have felt before. Ah! there it is! See! yon speck of light."

He seized Cosmo's arm, and pointed to

the darkest corner of the cabin, where there was no light at all.

"It is ever thus. The light comes like a dim star, and spreads till it takes her shape. There! see how it has grown already. Takes her shape vaguely at first; settles into part of an arm or a fold of her dress, and then the fragments crystallize together, and she stands before me with her pale, sad face. Look! No, no—there! Hast eyes, and canst not see? There! 'Twas but a foot a moment ago, and now her form is clear up to the girdle. Watch for the red spot. It is coming. *Now!*—said I not well? Just over the heart; red as red can be. That is where the death-shot passed. There is more blood higher up; but that is nothing, though it makes more show. That little spot, no larger than a rose, let Death in. Watch, and thou wilt see her face formed in that brighter glow above. Holy Mother of God! What change is this?"

Hitherto he had spoken quite calmly,

and with that tone of self-complaisance common in those who successfully predescribe the phases of a changing scene or object. He spake as though it were due to some merit in himself that the vision should present itself exactly as he had said it would be developed and appear. But at last, when what he had called "her pale, sad face" should have come into view, his whole manner altered.

Cosmo (who had been watching him with awe and wonder, and so worked upon by his earnestness that there were instants in which he fancied he could distinguish the dim outline of a female form in the darkness) felt his flesh creep as he noted that change. If ever a spirit from the other world was seen by reflection in the face of a living man, the spirit of Maria Desmond was on the face of Vincenti Della Torre, stamping it with surprise and horror, fear and supplication.

"Thou art going to speak," he cried, half in terror, half in protest. "I see it

in your eyes, from which the old sad expression has departed; in the frown upon your brow; in the menace of your outstretched hand. Thou hast never spoken yet. In the name of God, hold thy peace!"

"*In the name of God, speak!*" said a solemn voice.

Cosmo turned, and saw that Desmond stood in the doorway.

Never for a moment had he doubted that Cosmo would keep his promise and tell him faithfully all that should pass. Great as was his impatience to know how his scheme was progressing, agonizing as was his suspense, these would never have driven him to play the listener. He was drawn by some influence so strong as to prevent even the formation of an idea to resist it.

He was present when the slayer of "Sweetheart" first spoke of that speck of light, and when that cry, "Holy Mother of God! what change is this?" was wrung

from him. He knew, without an effort of thought, what change it was. The "pale, sad face" would appear no more. One glance at Vincenti was enough to show that, mad or sane, the vision he had now to confront was stern, terrible, irresistible —so irresistible as to need no mortal help.

But when Desmond heard it adjured in the name of God to hold its peace, the words, "*In the name of God, speak!*" rose unbidden to his lips.

"*Together!*" gasped the wretched man. "Then am I lost! But in mercy speak not *thou.* If thy face be so fearful, what would thy voice be? Let him speak, and I will answer."

"Where is our son?" said Desmond.

"I cannot answer," Vincenti replied, not to his questioner, but to the place whence he had never yet withdrawn his haggard, eager gaze. "If spirits know what passes in this world, thou canst bear me out that I speak the truth."

"But not the whole truth." This from Desmond.

"I will tell thee all I know, and he will hear me. Ah! that is kind! Thou hast lowered thy hand; thy face has softened somewhat. I can breathe more freely now. I will tell thee all. When I went with Marco to thy dwelling that night, I had not, as he" (with a gesture towards Desmond) "supposes, a fixed intention to take his life. No. I had long suspected that my kinsman was not true to the errand upon which he had been sent—at my suggestion—by the head of our house; and I wished to know the truth. Until I was quite sure that its heir was a traitor to his duty, I was not justified in acting independently and in defiance of him. From his own lips I learned that he had tricked me; that his father had robbed me of my revenge; that he himself would stand between me and justice."

"Justice?"

"Was it just that such a man should

rob me of my bride? Why could he not have left thee to wed according to the customs of thy race? Five years I laboured for a clue to find my enemy; and I found him, listening to a declaration that the vendetta was at an end, with thy arms around him, thy face pressed to his heart. I came not to kill, I tell thee, or to steal thy boy. It was Fate—Fate!"

"Speak of the boy," said Desmond, no longer able to control the yearnings of his heart. "No matter what thou didst intend to do—speak of what thou hast done."

The cabin was by this time quite dark. They could not see each other's faces. They spoke in whispers; but every word came out clear. Outside the swift river rushed on, glittering under the stars, to the sea.

"I carried the boy away," pursued Vincenti—speaking, as before, to his vision—"before me on the saddle, he striking me with his young hands and threatening

roundly. 'I will tell my father,' quoth he, 'and he will kill thee.' I said to myself, 'Ah! there is our blood in his veins.' He struggled and fought, and cried for help, so that we were forced to bind and gag him."

"My child! my little one!" moaned Desmond.

"Marco was for silencing him in a shorter way, but I withstood him. I would not kill the child, though I did not want him to live. It was enough for me that he should never be able to claim kinship with us; and to assure this, it was necessary that he should be lost—lost to himself, lost to all the world. My plan was to take him to a seaport, and ship him to some far country, which, perchance, he would never reach, or reaching, would be known to none."

"And so perish?" cried the father.

"Yes," Vincenti continued, more as though thinking aloud than answering. "Yes, I did think he would die. He was

sick when the ship sailed, and they were a rough set enough on board. I had to pay a large sum before they would take him, and I told them the truth."

"The truth!"

"My truth. That he was a child of whom his family were ashamed, and no questions would be asked how he fared for the future. Yes, I did think he would die; but there were women of the band, and I suppose one of these has succoured him."

"May the good God bless her!" prayed Desmond.

"Is it better so, or that he were with thee? Better, mayhap, for me. If the pain of his father for his absence has changed thee so, what wouldst thou be were he grieving for his death?"

"Whence sailed this company?" Desmond demanded.

"From Glasgow."

"For what country?"

"The New World. To colonize a place

called—what is another name for Scotland?"

"Caledonia."

"Right. New Caledonia."

"And this is solemn, sacred truth?"

"It is."

"Then thou needst say no more," Desmond moaned. "I know all the rest, God help me! 'Tis a rash and most unlucky venture; badly timed, badly led, badly provided. My son! my son! But thou art not lost yet. I will follow thee, I will seek thee, and I will find thee, though the rest of my life be spent in the search."

At this moment the lurid light of a torch flashed past the stern port-holes, and the voice of Dick Earle was heard hailing the ship, and saying that all was ready.

They called him on board, and found that Vincenti had sunk upon the deck just where he had confronted the *vision.* He was conscious, and apparently quite sane;

but so physically feeble, that he could not rise.

"It is all over now," he said. "Take me where you please."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE IRON KEY.

THERE was a slang phrase current in the days of my youth which exactly describes the frame of mind in which Master Willford left the ship. He felt like one who "had lost a shilling and found a fourpenny-piece." His grand *coup* had failed. There was no getting hold of Hugh Desmond's property and estate, because there stood Hugh Desmond in the flesh, all the affidavits, informations, and decrees to the contrary notwithstanding.

If big parchments, broad seals, and potent signatures could kill a man and leave him intestate and heirless, Desmond had no business to be alive; but alive he was. This was a great blow to Willford's hopes; but, on the other hand, he had profited by the resurrection. The officially dead had got him out of a serious scrape. That he had not done so out of pure benevolence was quite clear to Willford, who, as he seldom did anything without a motive that did not appear in the act, judged others by himself. He knew there was little love lost between them. Still, Desmond had got him out of that serious scrape.

Good Master Willford lived upon his character, and it would have been better for him to lose half a dozen intestate estates, than to be hailed before a justice for kidnapping and attempt to murder. This escape was the *fourpenny-piece;* and as he was inwardly congratulating himself

upon having saved this, something like the ghost of a chuckle passed his lips.

Ineffably sweet and soothing to the troubled mind is the thought that one has got something out of those who trouble. It is even a solace to reflect that they have not troubled as much as they might have done had they been a little smarter about it. As Willford went down the side he almost chuckled.

"Just in time," he mused; "another hour, and he would have been told what I had been doing."

So upon the whole there was a good deal to be thankful for; and the prize, being lost, did not look nearly so valuable as when there was a possibility to gain it. Even if Desmond had really been dead, that boy of his, of whom Vincenti Della Torre had spoken, might have turned up and found friends to support his claim.

Besides, there was capital to be made out of the disappointment. He had lost

his reward by his own uprightness. He might have seized it; but having conscientious doubts as to whether the supposed intestate were really dead, he—the very man who was to profit by his death—had helped his friends to find him! Thanks to his projected visit with Cosmo and Dick to the Southwark lodgings, such a story as this might be got up, to his present glory and future profit.

His quick thoughts had travelled so far when the boat's keel grated upon the hard, and his friend the honest mariner whispered, "I would speak with thee," as he helped him to jump ashore.

Their subsequent interview, which took place at Willford's old quarters at the Bell, was most satisfactory to the honest mariner; for not only did his patron waive all claim to the repayment of the passage-money for the "poor gentleman," but agreed to reimburse the skipper for losses sustained by the desertion of his crew. It suited Master Willford that this honest

mariner should engage new men, and be off as soon as possible.

With those broad pieces in his pocket, and a flask of buxom Mistress Franklin's best wine under his belt, the honest mariner's heart began to open. He, too had come well out of a bad business. He had got his money, and would have no evil dreams about that plank and the shot which was to have pulled it and its wretched burden down to the bottom of the sea. He had been with fellow salts who were troubled with evil dreams, and did not like what he saw. The money was his for nothing, and a good skinful of wine to boot. Willford was a good sort of fellow after all. He might have disowned him, thrown the blame on his shoulders; and then what chance of justice could he —a poor sailor—have had against a man so influential as Stephen Willford, the trusted of the king, and the officer of the bishop?

"Yes," he said aloud, "thou art a

staunch comrade, and a liberal. See here now ; I will give thee a keepsake."

"Nay, spend thy money for thyself," Willford replied, abstractedly.

"Money be ——, 'tis nought that I could buy, or thee either for that matter," the other persisted. "'Tis some foreign toy of no value, but right cunningly cut."

And he produced the key he had found on the deck of his ship—the key, the haft of which was shaped like an anchor entwined with seaweed—and flung it on the table.

Willford was thinking of something else. It was no pleasure to him, this hob-nobbing with a half-drunken sailor, and his thoughts were far away from such things as *keepsakes* from a fellow who he earnestly hoped might be drowned upon the first favourable opportunity. He was musing upon a new plan to get possession of Hugh Desmond's lands, which had begun to present itself dimly, but with some prospect of fruition. The casket containing his title-deeds had

been destroyed in the fire, and the deeds, of course, in it. If Desmond were to die, how could his heir make out his claim? Nay, more, how could Desmond himself resist being dispossessed, if attacked as the crafty one now musing knew how to attack him? He had purchased those lands himself out of his father's gold. The vendor was a ruined spendthrift, gone no one knew where. Ah! if Desmond had only perished with the casket, how simple it would all have been. Master Willford heaved a sigh, thus reflecting upon the uncertainty of human affairs, and then it was that the "keepsake," flung by the honest mariner, jingled on the table.

IT WAS THE IRON KEY!

In an instant he recognised it. In an instant the thought that Desmond had saved the casket flashed across his mind.

"Well," expostulated the donor, "there is no need to clutch it like that! It is thine; I give it thee with my free will. Gramercy! A pretty way to accept a gift!"

"'Tis mine already!" stammered Willford. "I lost it. I—I—did not know—I——. Forgive me, my friend, if I did appear discourteous, but the surprise! I did not know I had lost it."

"'Tis as good as a gift, anyhow," grumbled the other.

"Aye, and a valued one. I thank thee heartily for—where didst find it?"

"On the main deck."

"It must have fallen as I jumped from the bulwark."

"Nay; I picked it up for'ard of the main hatch."

"It may have rolled there."

"Flat things don't roll," said the mariner, beginning to wish he had not been so liberal. There was some value, it appeared, in that quaint piece of iron.

"No matter, 'tis doubly mine now," replied Willford, with what he intended to be a laugh, "first by property, and next by gift. But say, didst find any other?"

"Other key?"

"Aye; this is one of three. I may have dropped the other two also."

"I found but that."

"Didst search?" asked Willford, eagerly.

"Not I! Wherefore should I?"

"Good master captain, let us return on board thy ship to-night and look. I would not lose those keys for—for—— I cannot tell thee how much trouble it would cause me, were I to lose them."

"Be sure thou hast lost them first," said the mariner, stretching out his legs, and replenishing his glass. "'Tis mighty pleasant here. I have my fill of ship-board, I tell thee. Mayhap they are safe in thy pockets, or in thy valise. I budge not."

The witch-finder's brow darkened, and he muttered "swine!" under his breath, but he made pretence to feel in his pockets, and finding not what he sought, called the landlady to send in his valise, left in her charge. This he searched with well-feigned anxiety, and looking up with a face which

was utterly false, gasped. "I have them not!" which was perfectly true.

"'Tis not likely that thou didst drop all three together," said the mariner, sulkily, "or I should have seen them."

"Thou didst not search—thou hast said so."

"No one else will. Let them bide."

"Some one might find one by accident, just as thou didst," persisted Willford.

"And much he would get—a bit of iron! Leave me in peace, Master Willford; we will look to-morrow."

"To-morrow may be too late. Listen! The other two keys are not like this; they are more valuable."

"H'm!"

"One is made of silver."

"As heavy as yonder?"

"Nearly. And the third is of gold."

"That's worth seeking."

"It is indeed, to me, but not so much for its metal. I would give three times its weight in coined gold to have it safe in my hand."

"Thou hast boxes with strange locks, my friend."

"Most true. Those boxes are of workmanship as curious as their keys. I should be loth to break them open."

"And it would derange thee much to leave them closed?"

"Very much."

"How much?"

There was a glitter in the honest mariner's eye as he spoke, which was not lost on Willford. The man distrusted him. What should he do? Make a large bid or a small one? To gain time for consideration, he called to the drawer for another flask of that good wine; but the honest one would drink no more. Ship-board began to have a charm for him. He would have liked to stay where he was and get drunk; but if he did, Master Willford might go on board without him, and find what he wanted. The honest one smelt what might provide several royal drunks. So he declined the liquor, and repeated his

question, "How much?" Thus pressed, Willford made an offer sufficiently large to excite the skipper's cupidity, and not large enough to raise his suspicion.

"Five ounces of gold for the gold key; or as much silver for the silver one. Ten ounces of gold for both."

"Wouldst part with the iron one for five ounces of its own metal?" asked the honest mariner, in reply. "This is not the way to value such goods. Thou art trying to ride off upon the worth of the metal of which these keys are made; I am thinking of the worth of what they will unlock. My neighbour's box is half mine if I have the key."

"What meanest thou?"

"Roundly this, Master Willford. That iron key is not yours—*was* not, at the least, before I was simple enough to give it thee. I found it in a part of the ship where thou hadst not been, and it did not roll. Take it thyself, throw it on the floor, and if it roll a yard, call me a knave! That key was dropped by the man who stopped me

at Greenwich, or one of his followers. What if I were to go to Master Desmond and say, 'Kind sir, hast lost an iron key? If so, I—not thinking it might be thine—didst give it to one, Stephen Willford, as a keepsake.'"

"Thou hast better keep clear of Desmond," replied Willford. "He has thee on the hip."

"Mayhap; but would he throw me if I did him this good turn?"

"Tush! This is folly. When we have found the keys 'twill be time enough to settle their value—to me."

"A bargain has two sides, if you please."

"So has a quarrel. *We* must not quarrel. It would be a sad thing for one of us, Master Skipper, if we two were to quarrel. What is this Desmond to thee? Why pick him out of the score who were buffeting each other on thy deck? Above all, why doubt me?"—(this more in sorrow than in anger)—"*me*, the trusted servant of the

Prince Bishop, the king's officer? Go to! I thought thee a wise man!"

This brought back the honest one to the state of mind in which we found him before Mistress Franklin's good wine had warmed him into generosity and stimulated him into suspicion. If he could have depended upon getting Desmond as an ally, he would have braved it out with Willford; but he was not sure of Desmond. So he gave in, and they returned together to the ship, to pass the night on board together.

* * * * *

In the mean time, Vincente Della Torre had been removed to the house of Martin Earle, where they tended him according to their lights. What he required was rest—rest of body and of mind. Good living for the one (the poor wretch was half-starved), and anodynes for the other. But these were the *good old times.*

The sword was wearing out its scabbard, so they set to work sharpening the blade

and weakening the sheath. They bled him, they purged him, they starved him, and eventually they killed him—all according to rule.

When I say "they," I mean the doctors—and he had the best of them at his bedside. Go to Spain, or Spanish America, and get ill from fever, or break your leg, and the lineal descendants of those medicos will come and repeat the practice. First the lancet, then the emetic, then the purge, and *da capo* if you don't die.

Vincenti Della Torre never really revived. He had collapsed, rather than fallen, when Dick Earle's light was brought down into the cabin. He never stood upright again, or spoke, except to answer questions as to how he felt or what he needed, and the reply was always the same—"No matter; it will soon be over."

So he lingered, receiving every kindness from his hosts, whilst the doctors slowly but surely drenched and bled the little life he had brought there out of him.

"If he becomes delirious, tell me," said Hugh Desmond.

The time came sure enough, and Desmond sat by his bedside and heard every word. His raving was of people and places unknown to the listener. He did not once mention "Sweetheart's" name, or refer to her death, the vision in which she used to appear, or the fate of her boy.

Cosmo supposed that Desmond's object was to gain further information on that last head. And so it was at first; for when a man, gazing into utter darkness, addresses the figure of a dead person, speaks of its foot, its robe, its hands; notes changes in the expression of its countenance, and answers questions put by a living being well-known to him, as though they emanated from that vision—it was open, even in that superstitious age, for one like Desmond to seek some sort of corroboration of the truth of those replies, if it were only of that feeble sort which repetition gives.

But Cosmo, whose leanings were towards

the prosaic and material, rejected it all. The man was mad, had been mad, and would be so to the end. Why attend to what he said? The manner and subject of his raving had changed; but still it was raving, and nothing else.

Desmond heard him patiently, never replied a word, but watched by his dying enemy night and day till the end came.

CHAPTER XXII.

WESTWARD HO!

HUGH DESMOND had a quiet, resolute way of doing what he made up his mind to do. He had resolved to seek his lost boy in the New World, and most of his preparations were completed before his friends knew that he even contemplated such a step.

Cosmo had made his plan also. His brother-in-law must be taken out of England—out of his old life, the sad shadows of its lost joys, and the surroundings which kept its sorrows present to his mind. He would take him to Venice, to his old friend

Bosco; and little Mary—they called her by her English name now—should go with them, and learn to love Marcellina. As soon as the year of mourning for the old count was over, they (Cosmo and Marcellina) would be married, and then their home (wherever it might be) would be Desmond's, and his child would be their child—was she not a Ribolini?

They followed the remains of Vincenti Della Torre to the grave, and then the subject was broached.

"This ends one chapter of our lives, brother mine," said Cosmo. "'Tis idle looking back. We must begin a new one, with new thoughts and hopes."

"We will," Desmond replied, pressing his hand; "we will."

"Bravely said. I will take thee to see my promised bride—thou and little Mary—and when we have doffed these sad colours, thou shalt dance at my marriage."

"Mayhap I shall see thee married."

"Nay, 'tis past a mayhap."

"I might return in time," mused Desmond, half to himself.

"Return?"

"Cosmo, I must go and seek my boy."

"Saints of Heaven! Can it be that thou believest what that wretched madman said?" cried Cosmo.

"I dare not disbelieve it."

"Tush! 'Twas very madness. Remember, I was with thee at the time. Couldst see the figure he addressed?"

"No; all was dark to me."

"To me also. So we are sure that he was raving on one subject. There was no figure of a woman there. All he spoke was addressed to the creation of his disordered brain, which, as he imagined, compelled him to confess. Judge what was said by what was seen, and be a reasonable man, Master Desmond."

"Dost believe that the living have power over the dead?" Desmond asked, in a low, grave tone.

"I do not."

"*I* do. But a few days ago, I would have scoffed at one who would answer the question as I do now."

"And how has this change been wrought, I pray thee?"

"By thee."

"By me!" exclaimed Cosmo. "Art dreaming? Why, the subject has never even been broached between us! If it had——"

"I know what thou wouldst say," interrupted Desmond; "thou hadst also been a scoffer. Well, a seed will grow in one soil and perish in another; so there is no wonder that some minds will give root to thoughts which others cannot entertain. Hast considered well all the words and actions of the wretched man whose grave we filled to-day?"

"Thou hast given me no advice," said Cosmo. "Thou hast questioned me of them till I am weary. Wilt begin again?"

"No, I have heard enough. Thou hast kept thy promise to tell me all that passed

in my absence, and I thank thee. I will weary thee no more. I am convinced."

"Is it possible," asked Cosmo, laying a hand upon his shoulder, and regarding him with an expression of mixed surprise and anxiety, "that this wild idea was planted by a madman's savings?"

"He was not always mad."

"I am not so sure of that. His madness was more or less violent; but I doubt me if he were ever completely sane."

"Cosmo, I have pondered over all this deeply. He was sane from the time we entered that cabin till his death," said Desmond.

"But the vision?"

"Was not that which he had seen in his hours of demency."

"Why, he described what would appear before, as he fancied, it came into view."

"All but the face, mark that! Remember also the shriek of surprise and fear he gave when the face came into view. 'Holy Mother of God! *what change is this?*' those

were his words. There was a change then. The vision of his madness never spoke, never threatened him—recollect thou his gasp of relief when she lowered her hand? In a word, it never had power over him. This visitation had such power, and it came from me."

"In the name of wonder, how?"

"I cannot tell," Desmond replied, becoming suddenly excited. "It frights me even to think what that power can be, or how it may be used. I had it unknown to me, and used it blindly. The strangest part of all is that he—he, this sometime madman—knew what would happen if the living and the dead joined against him."

Cosmo remembered how earnestly the dead man had prayed to be taken somewhere, anywhere, out of Desmond's reach, and his wild cry of "Together!" when Desmond appeared at the cabin door. The recollection startled him, and there was no tone of mockery in his next question.

"But how camest thou aware of the possession of this power?"

"It grew upon me. I was grieving for my child, praying he might be restored to me, until, insensibly to myself, the cravings of my heart got beyond prayer—they became commands. Then came the thought that the angel in heaven, who was his mother, might be permitted to help me from hoping it might be so. I passed—I know not how—into entreating, then into willing with all the force of my mind that it should be so—and so it was. No, Cosmo! it was not a madman's vision which came to Vincente Della Torre that night. He was sane. He saw with other eyes than ours; was compelled to speak by some force we do not understand, and his words are true."

"At least they can be verified," said Cosmo, after a pause.

"How?"

"By inquiry at the port from which the expedition sailed."

"Not so. A child more or less would

make no matter. Besides, he was put on board, most like, at the last moment."

"With no one to care for or protect him. Alas! my brother, knowing what thou dost of this misguided company, is there hope enough to fill thy sails for so terrible a voyage?"

"It has no terrors for me," replied Desmond, with a sad smile. "Thou meanest right kindly, kinsman, and I thank thee. I thank thee with all my heart for thy offer touching mine—mine other child. In good sooth, I had it on my tongue to beg thee shelter her till I should return. Take her to Venice, to thy Marcellina. Dame Martha Denys, whose son goes with me, will tend her on the voyage. They will be here to-night."

"Thy plans are laid well," observed Cosmo, somewhat quickly.

"Nothing can change them. If thou wilt not take the child—'tis not a man's charge, and——"

"God's life! is she not blood of my

blood," Cosmo broke out. "Was not the proposition mine?"

"Ay, but it included me. The child alone is a different burden."

"With all thy skill," Cosmo replied, laughing, "I would rather have Dame Martha for a nurse than thee. But if thou *must* go, remember Master Willford, and take heed to leave thy affairs in good order and in safe hands."

"Half an hour's talk with good Martin Earle will do all that," Desmond replied with the nearest approach to gaiety he had shown for many a day. He was going to move and to act; to venture and to dare. His mind was freshened up by the prospect, as soon as his body would be by the performance; when the blue sea would be under him, and every bound of the good ship be bringing him nearer and nearer to his boy. Cosmo noted the change, and though scarcely half convinced, said to himself, "It is well. He will not find

what he seeks, but may return with another blessing—oblivion!"

He had his half-hour with Martin Earle, and a longer interview with Dame Martha the next morning. It was not out of any mistrust of the goldsmith that he made no alteration in his compact with her. The casket was to remain in her keeping. The oath of Desmond to Denys was ratified. He had little that was new to say except this—and he repeated it solemnly as they separated. "If I do not return; *beware the hand which holds the iron key.*"

Has the reader forgotten John Eastman —Dick Earle's "dog?" Honest John had been having a bad time of it ever since his fellow 'prentice returned. The house was full of whisperings and mystery. Another foreigner was brought there sick, and died. Dick was more estranged than ever to him. He might go out and stay away for hours, and their master—hitherto so strict in such matters—said not a word; he seemed to

like having him out of the way. Who was this Desmond—who this Master Willford? that the one should sit night and day by the dying stranger's bedside, and the other come so often to ask how it fared with him. They were all mixed up in something—but what was it? Could it be another Popish Plot? John became angry with Dick, discontented with his master, vexed with himself, and suspicious of everybody. He also became curious, and wounded self-esteem whispered, "find out what is going on, and let them know you're not the fool they treat you like." With infinite cunning (as he thought) he made the acquaintance of Master Willford, and soon became quite intimate with that gentleman. They supped together almost every night, and gradually the 'prentice elicited with infinite cunning, again (as he thought) that Master Desmond was a dangerous character in league with those foreigners against his (John's) worthy master, and that Dick—poor foolish Dick!—was unconsciously

abetting them in their nefarious designs. This was morally certain, but could not *yet* — confidential Master Willford laid great stress upon the "yet,"—be proved.

We, who know Master Willford, need not be told that he purposely threw himself in John's way, and pumped him dry.

Yes, there was another conspiracy against the life of his most sacred Majesty, and Desmond was in it. To no other man than John would Master Willford have said so, and perhaps he was wrong to trust any one with the King's secrets; but then John was so prudent, and had so won his, Master Willford's, confidence, that——well, he had told him so much, and there was no harm going on, especially as by doing so he might save that worthy man and excellent citizen, Martin Earle, from imminent peril. There was a conspiracy, and its members knew each other by the possession of certain keys curiously fashioned in gold and silver. Had he (John) ever seen such keys in the possession of Desmond or of the foreigners?

John had not, but he had heard Desmond asking about some key which he had lost. Well, let him, John, be on the alert, watch well all that happened, and report. Above all, let him be on the watch for a curious gold key, and one somewhat of the same sort in silver. These once obtained the conspirators would be baffled. When Desmond's approaching departure was reported, the 'prentice was told to take careful note of everything which that conspirator might leave in the goldsmith's charge; "for," said Master Willford, "if perquisition be made hereafter, and those keys be found in his house, he would be a lost man."

Thus was John led to believe that it would be his duty, as a loyal subject and a good 'prentice, to be a spy in his master's house, and—upon occasion—a thief.

Master Willford saw daylight again. Desmond might never return from the New World. The child which was to be taken to Italy might die. Patience! The

fruit would ripen and fall, or else events could be so shaped as to render its plucking safe and easy. Now was the time to clear up all doubt about the casket of the three keys. If it had not been destroyed it would be deposited with Martin Earle; that was certain. Desmond would never think of taking it to sea with him, nor was it probable that Dame Martha would be hampered with it on her voyage. It would be left with the goldsmith if it existed. John Eastman was instructed to be particularly watchful for the casket or for any package which, from its size and weight, might be supposed to contain it. But no casket, or any sign of one, appeared; nothing but their ordinary wearing apparel came with Martha Denys and the child. The young smith had not brought anything for his master, or for Martin Earle; and Desmond had made no deposit, save something between a small sack and a large purse apparently full of papers, in the latter's strong box; and this—whatever it

was — had been there for years. Still, Desmond was constantly inquiring if his missing key was found, and appeared vexed and anxious about it.

"Why such trouble about a fantastic piece of iron," mused Willford, "if the casket be destroyed, or no longer contain those deeds ?"

One night John Eastman met his entertainer with a deeper shade of gloom than usual upon his face. The ship chartered by Desmond and the *Venus* which had come round from Southampton for Cosmo de Ribolini were to sail on the morrow in company as far as the mouth of the Thames, and there was to be a high junket on board, to wish Desmond good luck and God speed over the great ocean. Martin Earle and Dick, and a host of Dick's friends, male and female, were invited; and there was to be feasting and music until the tide turned, and then the guests were to come back in shallops.

"But I—" said John Eastman in conclusion—"*I* have to stay at home, and mind the shop. No outing for *me*, I promise thee."

"Methinks good Master Earle might have closed his house for one day," mused sympathising Willford.

"Or left Dick in charge, why should he have all the pleasure, and I all the work? Who is he? Just a 'prentice like me, no more! though he is master's nephew. My name is as good as his, I know that," growled John Eastman.

John emphasized those last words in a manner which raised Willford's curiosity. A few discreetly pressed questions elicited the fact that Hugh Desmond had made his will, to which it was intended that the goldsmith and Dick Earle should set their names as witnesses; but when the former had signed and Dick was called, it was found that he was not in the house. Then "as they couldn't get their precious Dick," sneered Eastman, "they said that I would

do, and I wrote my name. It was as good as his."

"And Desmond took the will away?"

"Nay; he gave it to my master, who locked it away in the strong box."

"Ha! Didst read any as thou wrote thy name?"

"Not a word. What was it to me?"

"Right. I warrant he has left thee nothing; nay, being a witness thou couldst take nothing."

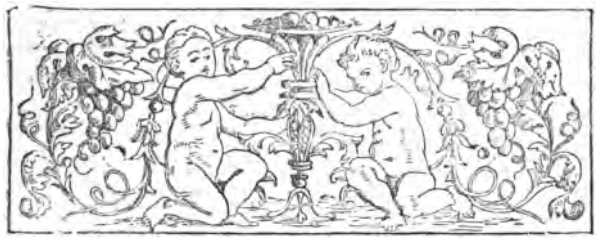
"I tell thee, Master Willford, there is nought but hard work and disappointment for me."

"Not so. Listen! Why should we not enjoy ourselves to-morrow as well as they? Thou shalt not spend a lonely day, dear lad, I will keep thee company. Thy master cannot well return till midnight. We can shut up at six o'clock, and pass the night right gaily! Dost agree? Tush! I have some crowns to spare. What! is this Dick to be the only 'prentice who can ruffle it in the Mall or Tower gardens?"

This settled it. Here was a friend, indeed, one who would not only make the evening joyous, but share in the dull routine of the day! Here was one, higher placed and richer than Dick Earle would ever be, who treated him (poor dupe of a John) as an equal—no "dog" now. When Dick came back from taking leave of his fine foreign friends, he would no doubt want his "dog" to trot after his heels again, and sit up and beg for any scrap of kindness or flattery he might be pleased to fling him. No such thing! He should be taught that his fellow 'prentice was no longer his "dog," and that if he presumed so to treat him, he would meet his match. Friend indeed! What sort of a friend had Dick ever been? Had he ever offered to share his work; to stay in a whole day, when he had no need to do so, to keep him company? Never!

Not another word was spoken against Master Willford's generous proposition, and it was agreed that as soon as Martin Earle

and his friends had embarked, Master Willford should join John Eastman at the shop, and there keep watch and ward together over the goldsmith's goods and chattels, including, of course, the will and papers of Hugh Desmond committed to his care.



CHAPTER XXIII.

"WHAT HAS HE STOLEN?"

THE junket on board the *Venus* was Dick Earle's idea. As a rule, Dick did not require much provocation to indulge in or organise this sort of vanity; but now he had a better provocative than the prospect of fun for himself. He wanted to cheer up Desmond—to start him happily upon a quest which every one considered hopeless, with bright smiles and pleasant sounds—to lift him, if he could, out of the dark cloud which had fallen upon his life, and appeared to grow denser every day. To no one save Cosmo

de Ribolini had Desmond confided his theory respecting the character of the influence under which Sweetheart's murderer had disclosed the fate of her child. There was no need for explanations with Martin Earle. This was by no means the first occasion upon which his erratic friend and client had come one morning to say he was bound for the other side of the world on the next day but one; nor, after what good Master Willford had attempted, was there anything strange in the wanderer making his will. Easy-going Dick, finding his elders satisfied, asked no questions, and having gained the goldsmith's approbation of the junket, set himself to work upon its details *con amore.* As it was to be a surprise to Desmond, it came off on board the *Venus,* which, as we know, had come round from Southampton to take Cosmo back to Venice.

"I'm right loth to leave thee behind, lad," said Martin Earle to his junior 'prentice, when he had given him his instruc-

tions for the day, "right loth, but *all* cannot play at once. Some one must watch."

"Aye, master," replied Eastman, "and that *some* one is always *this* one," touching his own breast.

There was nothing sulky, or even reproachful in his tone. He merely seemed to say, "I'm poor Pilgarlic! I've got to take all the kicks, whilst others get the halfpence, and I'm accustomed to it." This touched the goldsmith, because it was in a great measure true. John Eastman had not been quite fairly treated of late. He was in the way, and we all know what happens to people whose room is for some reason preferred to their company. Many a distant errand had been invented; many a piece of drudgery improvised, to get rid of John, or keep him employed out of hearing. The goldsmith was touched more by the absence of a reproach, than by any that ill-used John could have made.

"Thou art a good lad, and an honest," said Earle, laying his hand kindly upon the

'prentice's shoulder, "and I will make it up to thee, never fear. If I have seemed churlish to thee, John, of late, it was not for any fault of thine, or because of any ill will. I love thee, lad. No, no; many things have gone cross, and—and—well, it matters not now. I will make it up to thee, lad. There! my hand upon it!"

He took John Eastman's hand with his own left, and slapped his own right into it, heartily. Masters did not usually make such pledges with their 'prentices. The "touch"—a dozen passers by saw it—was an honour, though it was intended only as a kindness. It brought the tears into John Eastman's eyes——and it cost him his life.

Unpunctuality was not a fashionable vice in the good old times. The last petticoat fluttered up the side of the *Venus* within a few minutes of the appointed hour of sailing, and the two ships started with the last half of the ebb tide under them, a bright sun above, and a wind which would

be more or less fair through most of the reaches of the twisting Thames. There was no hurry. On they went lazily, with just enough sail set to give them steerage way, until the tide slackened, and stood still, and turned. Then the merry-makers —with whose proceedings this history does not occupy itself—took to their shallop, and the ships, with every stitch of canvas set, bore up into the freshening breeze, and heeled over to it, starting sheets of hissing foam from their bows, and plunging on as though they would say, "*Now then! work at last!*"

Hugh Desmond remained on board the *Venus*, so as to be with little Mary and Cosmo until the last. If good wishes could send fair winds and a happy ending for his voyage, he had nothing left to pray for. Many a cup had been drained to his health and good fortune; many a mother had blessed him in her heart. Was he not seeking a motherless child? The children —shy of him at first, for his black dress

and grief-worn face—soon clustered round him and climbed on his knee, to be told of little Hugh, and exact promises that he would bring the boy to play with them when he came back, and to tell the wonderful things he had seen. Hope is as catching as fear. *When* you come back, was the date fixed for all sorts of pleasures. No one said "if."

Little Mary also became a personage. She too was going to strange lands where her mother was a little child. Did that strange thing like a heart she wore round her neck belong once to her mother? the other children asked. No, but it would have belonged to her if she had not died. Was it a blessed charm? she did not know. Her father had tied it round her neck just before they started, and told her never to part with it, but to wear it always, night and day. "And he kissed it—cried over it," said the little maid; "so I suppose it is blessed."

When the shallop had passed out of sight,

she sat herself on her father's knee, and asked him to tell her about her golden heart, and why she was to wear it night and day.

"Thou art too young to understand," he said, kissing her. "'Tis a fancy. See, this is for thy brother," and he showed her the silver key. "Thine means *Charity*—his *Faith.* I had yet a third, which meant *Hope,* but——" the words "*I have lost it,*" were on his tongue, and he checked himself with a shudder.

Days passed—long, uneventful days—and at last the time arrived when the courses of the two ships no longer lay together. With a heavy heart Desmond took leave of his child and Cosmo. Good Dame Martha was so affected by the parting with her son that she lay half fainting on the deck; but as Desmond passed and whispered one word in her ear, she revived, as though the life had been re-smitten into her by an electric shock. "Ay," she muttered, as the boat left the side amidst

the cheering of the crew, and poor little Mary's cries to her father to come back. "Ay, Desmond and Denys there! where the sun is setting. Denys and Desmond here! where it will rise again. Hush, hush, my child! I will remember, master; I will *remember.*"

It was almost night when the shallop landed its tired passengers at London Bridge. Martin Earle and a few of the old folks, who had come to consider the best part of a day's junketing to be the getting home again when it was all over, made straight for their beds. Dick, and some of those younger spirits who had not learned what "enough" means, made service on escort duty an excuse for prolonging the fun of the day—an excuse which their fair partners did not wholly reject. So that the streets were quite dark and deserted by the time when—the last leave-taking over—he wended his way towards Lombard Street with the satisfaction of having been the promoter, manager, and all but hero of an

" out," the pleasure of which had not been overshadowed by a single cloud. He turned into Lombard Street, and saw a sight which sent his joyous blood curdling cold in his veins. His first idea was that Martin Earle's house was on fire; there was such a blaze of light, such a crowd around, such rushing to and fro! There was no fire. The glare was made by the watch with their flambeaux, and neighbours searching the yard with torches; but something extraordinary had happened, that was certain. Dick charged into the mass, sending several highly respectable persons right and left into the gutter, and made for his uncle's room, followed by shouts of " There he goes! hold him! Nay, 'tis the other"—which he did not heed; or heeding, could not understand at this juncture. Prone on the floor, within reach of his strong box, where he had stood a hale strong man only an hour before; his face woefully distorted, and the life wrung out of half his body by the awful grasp of

paralysis—lay Martin Earle, the goldsmith!

It was some time before his shocked and bewildered nephew could persuade the bystanders to speak one at a time, telling what had happened; and even then some had one story and some another; but all agreed thus far. On returning alone to his house he had found it shut up, and knocked in vain for entrance. Becoming alarmed he called some neighbours with whose help he forced the outer door. This done, he had gone straight to his counting-room, and the next thing heard was a shriek, and then a heavy fall. They rushed to the spot, and found him to all appearance dead; his strong box broken open, and a portion of its contents scattered on the floor.

The "other" 'prentice had robbed his master and escaped with the spoil! From this point accounts varied. Some went that he was in a fit, others that he had been struck down by the robber; and there were those who were sure they had seen

a man jump from the window as they ran in. A large smear of blood upon the floor under the fallen merchant's head, appeared to bear out this supposition, until the doctor arrived, and finding no wound upon him, dismissed it.

But how came that blood upon the floor?

They made a bed for him where he lay, for the doctor forbade his being moved, and towards the grey of the morning he opened his eyes and tried to speak; pointing his one living hand towards the strong box. Dick tried to quiet him, but he became more and more excited; when at the doctor's desire his tablets were found, and held so that he might write what his poor lips could not articulate. He wrote this:—

"*Dick, what has he stolen? The truth, all; or suspense will kill me.*"

Ah me! for such an end to a good man's life. The truth was that he was ruined! All his savings—all the bonds, deeds, and

securities for other's savings confided to his care, were gone! And amongst them the leathern satchel, containing the will and papers of Hugh Desmond!

END OF BOOK I.

BOOK II.

THE FRUITS OF IT.

CHAPTER I.

"SPLENDID OF MR. TREMAYNE."

THE fruits of it ripen in our own days; and better days, I think, they would be found by many of those in whom perhaps the reader has taken some interest. For example, poor old Martha Denys, instead of being dragged to the river, and "tried" for witchcraft, might, in these more enlightened times, have made quite a nice little income out of her reputation as an entertainer of spirits from other worlds. She might have ridden, not on a *broom*, but in a well-appointed equipage, with a name commonly so pro-

nounced, and a good many of us would have paid our guinea to assist at the *séances* she might have given. And all this without being one whit more of a witch than Master Willford found her!

Vincenti Della Torre, with Scotland Yard after him (instead of Hugh Desmond), might have gotten off altogether. Scotland Yard would probably have formed a *theory* as to the murder of Sweetheart, and have given the right man plenty of time to get out of the reach of Extradition Treaties, whilst its agents were fitting it to the wrong one.

More than two centuries and a half have passed since the SEEDS OF IT were sown, as related in the First Book of this history; and you have not got to wait for the quickening of the germs, for the appearance of the first green spearlet with which the life below is fighting its way into the upper air. You have nothing to fear from flood, or drought, or insect. Quicker than rose Jack's famous Beanstalk my FAMILY TREE

has grown, and its fruits are in your hand!

But the one story is ended, and this, you may say, is a new one. Good, my friends. When does any story end, and where will you find a new one?

I had once a little child, who always asked, "And what then?" at the end of the tales I told her. I had married my good princes and princesses, I had killed my bad kings, enchanters, and such like, as dead as I possibly could; everybody who deserved happiness was made happy, and *vice versâ*. But the end was not yet. There came the inevitable, "*And what then?*"

Depend upon it, the dear little maid was right, and there is always something to be told till the end of Time, though the story-teller who began the tale may not live to tell it.

In the pages which follow, you have the "what then," when Hugh Desmond started for the New World in quest of

his boy, leaving the casket with the three keys in charge of the poor folks he trusted.

* * * * *

The parish church of King's Morton was decorated last Christmas as it had never been decorated before.

"The old order changeth, giving place to new."

The old order was for the clerk to pick the dust out of sundry holes which his predecessors had bored in the woodwork of the pew doors, and to stick therein little low-spirited twigs of holly—one for each pew; for him to tie handfuls of stiff green stuff round the candlesticks on reading-desk and pulpit, and to fill the baptismal font with the fragments that remained.

King's Morton was an old-fashioned town, and the King's Mortonians old-fashioned people, for the most part. The old order did very well for them, and it lasted till pretty Bessie Raynor, the doctor's (M.D.) second daughter—who had

been almost adopted by an aunt of High Church views in London—came back to spend Christmas with her family. Then what a change was there! Birnam Wood marching to Dunsinane did not involve the cutting of more evergreens than this decoration under the new order required.

The chancel became a bower, with a huge white cross slanting from the east window, and the legend, "GLORY TO GOD, ON EARTH PEACE, GOOD WILL TO MEN," in fantastic letters a foot high, made of red berries, around it. You could hardly get in or out of your pew for the festoons which lined the aisles.

Half the young gentlemen, and all the young ladies of the congregation bitten by Bessie (previously bitten herself by several London and Brighton curates of advanced views), went mad upon the work, drove every gardener in the parish into despair by the most barefaced robbery of shrubs and flowers, tore their dresses and spoiled their hands, caused the rector (whose bishop

was decidedly "low") anything but a merry Christmas, and left such a mess behind them, that it took a small army of char-women to clean up the sacred edifice in time for church.

Bessie Raynor did not tear her dress, or suffer a scratch upon her little rosy fingers. She drew the designs, gave the orders, cooked up the enthusiasm, encouraged the predatory, snubbed remonstrants, coaxed the rector, praised every one, and put the finishing touches to the work. All obeyed her.

When, early on Christmas Eve, she subsided, in assumed despair, on the top of a step ladder, and cried, "More white, *much* more white, or I'm a lost girl. If any one loves me, let them get me—oh! heaps of white!"—a gentleman who had just dropped in to see what was going on, as he was too busy to help, forgot his business, and rode away twelve miles for camellias.

Now it is not easy to get "Oh! heaps of white" (flowers) on the twenty-fourth of

December, especially in a country already ravaged by Miss Bessie Raynor's Uhlans.

But they were got, and "Oh, Mr. Tremayne, how SPLEN-DID of you!" was her greeting, as she buried her flushed face in the basket. Then she looked up—still stooping over her treasure—and added, "I shall take this beauty for my very own; may I?"

She had grey eyes, with opal rings round the iris, and a very soft light in them just then. He watched her as she fastened the bud under her brooch, and tried hard to say "Yes," but his voice failed him.

Dr. Raynor had also dropped in on his return from his "rounds," to escort his wife home. She—good lady—had sacrificed herself to the decrees of propriety, and was doing chaperone to the fair brigade of Bessie's army. The old folks saw the last touches given, and the workers under way to their respective homes. They followed their own contingent, walking slowly, with the air of people who have something to

say to each other which neither wants to begin. At last the doctor came suddenly to a halt, stuck his stick decisively in the snow, and said,

"It won't do at all."

Now this might have been a perfectly logical conclusion to something which had been passing in his own thoughts, but it was not a very intelligible commencement of a conversation with his wife, so that lady replied, "Oh, indeed!" which did not help him on.

"Have you noticed how attentive young Tremayne is to our Bessie?" he asked, still at the halt, and fidgetting with his stick.

"Yes, dear, I have."

"Well, that's what won't do. If it had been Mary——"

"I think there is no need to drag Mary into it," interrupted mamma. "Of course she has not had her sister's advantages, but I don't like to hear her slighted."

"Bless her heart! who slights her? Not

I. I think the best praise one can give a girl in these days is that she would make a good poor man's wife."

"Percy is an estimable young man," said Mrs. Raynor, as they resumed their walk, slower than ever, "and if he had his rights——"

"Rights! He has none; never had. One thing that I like him for is that he doesn't cry over spilt milk."

"Well, my dear, we will not argue the point."

"It isn't arguable. If I promise little Peggy Smith a half-crown, and change my mind, or die without giving it, *I'm* guilty of a breach of faith; but she has no *rights.* She never earned the money, or any rights over it."

"But there are rights which poor Percy has earned."

"That's another thing, quite another thing. I thought you were thinking of the estate," said the doctor, cooling down.

Now his better half had really been think-

ing of the estate, and would continue to do so to the end of time. She was a woman, and had a woman's abstract ideas of right and wrong, upon which logic and law were expended in vain.

"Poor Percy" had been promised a great fortune, and did not get it. The person who did get it had not been promised it—on the contrary, every step, but one, was taken to keep him out of it. "Poor Percy" was "estimable," and the other wasn't. That was the rock upon which his right rested. For the present Mrs. Raynor was content to leave them there, and talk of those lesser interests which the doctor had said were "quite another thing."

"If Sir Stephen did what he ought to do, he would have a good income," she observed.

"But a precarious one."

"He would be all but master of Warnstead."

"Till the real master came."

"My dear, you know he cannot come as long as Mr. Dennis lives, and he may be spared for twenty years."

"Or die to-morrow."

"Good gracious! You don't mean to say that——"

"I mean to say that he is a man, and mortal, that's all," interrupted the doctor. "How you snap one up! Do you think that our Bessie would be happy as the wife of Sir Stephen Willford's land agent?"

"That is, supposing he come back."

"One has to suppose the worst."

"How much ought a land-agent—for such an estate as Warnstead—to get a year?"

"About a thousand, one way and another."

"Oh, George!" said his wife, laying a hand on his arm, "and we began with three hundred!"

"Yes, old woman," replied the doctor, gaily; "but that was two and twenty years ago, and you had not been spoiled by an aunt in London."

"I'm half sorry we let Bessie go," mused her mother.

"I am *quite*," growled the other parent.

At this juncture they had to cross a lane. Just at a sharp turn therein, and as the doctor helped his companion down the bank, they were nearly run over by a horseman, and he half unseated by the starting of his steed at the sudden apparition.

"Oh, Mrs. Raynor, I'm so sorry! Doctor, I hope I did not scare you," he stammered. "Be quiet, you brute!"—(this to his horse)—"I did not see you because of the turn."

"Scare me!" cried the doctor. "No; but you knocked me into the ditch."

"Are you hurt?" asked Tremayne, dismounting. ("Talk of the dev—" was the doctor's first utterance, but he did not finish the sentence). "I'm sure you must be. Do take my horse."

"No, thank ye," said the doctor, rubbing his shin, and looking askance upon an

animal, two of whose hoofs (and not the same two) had been in the air for the last three minutes. "I'll walk! I might run over somebody. When I ride, Percy, I go easy around turns, especially where a foot-path crosses."

"I was in a hurry, sir; I wanted to catch you," pleaded Percy,

"I'm sure he didn't mean—" began Mrs. Raynor, but the doctor cut in.

"Well, you've caught us, sure enough. What now?"

"I think, dear, we had better be getting home," said his wife. (Her instinct taught her that something was coming, and she wanted her lord's shin to cease smarting before it came. Such small things make men cross, you know). "Mr. Tremayne can call to-morrow and—and—wish us a merry Christmas."

But the doctor persisted.

"Out with it, man alive, now we're here!"

"I wanted you to give me half an hour, sir, to speak to you about something."

"Hum! Half-past four, and we dine at six. Ten minutes to get home, twenty to dress. Yes, there's time; come on now."

"Thanks. You're sure you will not take my horse?"

"Not if I know it," replied the doctor.

Mrs. Raynor had barely thrown off her snow-draggled garments, when in came Bessie—fair Bessie—arrayed from her neck downwards in glittering black, lit up here and there by bunches of the new blue, "just out," coral roses in each delicate ear, a dead-gold dog collar round her throat, and bracelets to match on her wrists.

Not exactly the toilette, you will say, for a country doctor's daughter at the family dinner.

"But what," said she, "is the use of having nice things if you cannot wear them?"

The "nice things" came from that aunt in London who had all but adopted her,

and by whom she was only lent to her family for Christmas. When I say "all but adopted," I mean that it was perfectly well understood, on both sides, that she was to live with her father's rich sister, and be her heiress, but no regular form of adoption had been gone through.

There were a good many Raynor mouths —old and young—to be fed every day, a good many educations to be provided for, and the fee-paying population of King's Norton had not increased in proportion to their doctor's obligations.

His sister, widowed at thirty-five, had had enough of matrimony, but not of the gay world in which, for the first time, she found herself rich and free. She had not married for love, and love had not come (as some wise ones assured her it would) afterwards. No children had brightened a life of splendid servitude, of which she did not receive at last the full reward. Mr. Rose left half his money away from her.

A handsome widow, with only thirty-five years on her head, and three thousand a year at her bankers, is in many ways to be envied; but society calls her "detrimental" as soon as it is ascertained that she is not again in the matrimonial market, on account of a jealous proviso in the defunct Rose's will.

She attracts young men, and gets in the way of young women, and careful mammas can find excuses not to invite her—such as "Oh! she does not dance," when a ball is pending, or "She's no use—she never plays," when invitations to other gatherings are discussed.

But if she be a chaperone; if she have a pretty girl under her wing who *does* dance, and *will* play, and has expectations—don't you see! Why, then she is a power in the land, and can be as gay as she pleases, under cover of affording gaiety to another.

This Mrs. Rose found out during a visit paid by her nieces, Mary and Bessie; and

as she did not want both, selected the one she considered best for her purpose—the youngest, the handsomest, the most *showy* of the two—and, it is only fair to say, soon grew fond of her, and spoilt her to the top of her bent.

And Bessie took to spoiling kindly. She was one of those girls who always look well, and seem in public to be in a good humour. She graced her surroundings, whatever they were. Dress her in a sixpenny print, and the thought how simplicity becomes her would arise. Let her sweep past "in sheen of satin and glimmer of pearl," and you would exclaim, "How well she carries it off!"

Things—I am a male creature, and dare not condescend (as the Scotch lawyers say) to particulars in ladies' dress—things, I repeat, lost their individuality, and combined to grace her. Where they were wanted to hang, they hung; and where they ought to cling, they clung. Her hair would fall into the most fashion-

able disorder all by itself, and the flowers on her skirt never got tumbled.

She did not spare her "nice things." She liked to pelt King's Morton with new bonnets, and to sting the hearts of its female population with envy—not unmixed with hatred and malice—by changing exhibitions of clinging robes of designs and colours which had not, as yet, penetrated into those parts.

This is the young lady who entered her mother's room, as just now narrated, and said—

"Papa's got Mr. Tremayne in the study, ma; and I'll bet you anything you like it's all about me!"

CHAPTER II.

IN THE STUDY WITH PAPA.

"NOW then," said Doctor Raynor, as soon as he had pulled off his wet boots and socks, and warmed his feet at the fire. "You see that I stand on no ceremonies with you, Percy. Never mind preliminaries, and fire away."

"I have written to my cousin, sir," said his obedient visitor, "and here is a copy of my letter. If you will be kind enough to read it—I have made it as short and as much to the point as I could—you will see how I stand, and what I want."

Doctor Raynor took the paper, and read as follows :—

"Warnstead, Nov. 25th, 1874.

"My dear Sir Stephen,

"It is now three years since your father died, and, at your request, I went on as before managing this estate. I asked you at the time to appoint some more experienced person as your agent, but this you declined to do; and as you have found no fault with my proceedings, and the accounts furnished appear to be satisfactory, I must conclude that what I have done meets with your approval. Upon several occasions I have hinted that my position was not as clearly defined as I could wish, without receiving from you a satisfactory reply. The time has come when I must do something more than hint.

"I want you to send me a formal appointment as your land-agent, and attach an income to the position, in order that I may judge whether I am justified in ask-

ing one who has become very dear to me, and to whom I flatter myself I may become dear, to share it with me. In four words —I want to marry. If you do not know what land-agents for an estate such as yours usually receive, I suppose you can easily find out. Let this be a purely business transaction. Forget that we are relations, and leave all that passed previous to my uncle's death entirely out of the question. If your proposals do not suit me, I shall feel no hesitation in telling you so. If my services do not suit you, be equally frank. There are plenty of competent men for you to choose from, and I dare say I shall be able to find other employment.

"Please let me hear from you before Christmas.

"Yours sincerely,

"PERCY TREMAYNE."

"A straightforward, manly letter," said the doctor. "Well, has he answered it?"

"He has," replied Percy, handing a sheet of pink paper, bearing an elaborate monogram at the top, and exhaling a strong odour of musk. "Read it, and tell me what it means."

What it expressed was this :—

"New York, Dec. 14th, 1874.

"DEAR PERCY,

"I have yours of the 25th ult. What on earth do you want more than you have got? What is better than a *carte blanche?* Is not Warnstead big enough for you and the lady, to whom I have not the slightest doubt you will become very dear? Setting aside the amiable arrangement made for me by my excellent father and Mr. Dennis (who, by the bye, I hear is good enough to patronize you), I shall probably never trouble the old place with my presence, unless I become very dear to somebody, which is not likely, as

I am already very dear to myself, and inclined to let well alone.

"Really, my dear fellow, if I were only to judge you by your letter, I should take the first steamer for Liverpool, rush up by the express, advertise for an agent, and thank God that I had got rid of a —— goose. You are treated by me as a cousin, and you want to be a paid servant! You have the position of a country gentleman, and you pine for an appointment as bailiff! This is the consequence of becoming 'dear!' You are in love, my poor Percy, and so stand excused.

"I haven't the least idea what people pay land-agents, and there is no one here to enlighten me. It would tire me dreadfully to find out. *You* know. Why bother me with this more than the price of hay and corn. Take what you want, and put it down in the bill, which I never see, and if I did would probably not understand.

"With best regards to the 'dear' one,

and regrets that I am unable to offer my services as best man,

"Believe me,

"My dear cousin,

"Yours very sincerely,

"STEPHEN WILLFORD.

"P.S.—How about that £3714 8*s.* 2*d.* spent on some sort of improvements the year before last? Rather a big sum to sink all at once, wasn't it? I hope it's soon going to show some return. I muddle away a good deal of money one way and another, and shall want to draw more than usual next year.

"S. W."

"New York!" said Doctor Raynor, turning back to the date. "I thought he lived in Paris?"

"So he does generally."

"What's he doing in America?"

"I really cannot say."

"Hum! Well, what do you think of his answer?"

"I don't like the postscript, sir."

"Nor I. How much have you been in the habit of drawing?"

"Very little, I have been living at his expense, of course — drinking his wine, eating his mutton and his game, and that sort of thing. And when I went up to London on his business last summer, I charged my hotel bill; but in actual money, I don't suppose I have drawn two hundred pounds."

"Not in three years?"

"No."

"More fool you," the doctor muttered to himself. "I'm afraid you've spoiled your market," he added aloud.

"I had no need for money. Sir William was very liberal," Percy replied. "Besides, I always expected that my cousin would make some com——some arrangement, and wasn't in any hurry about it until——" Here he came to a halt, and got very red.

"Have you discussed this with your mother?" the doctor asked.

He had not been listening to the last explanation, and was looking into the fire with his elbows on his knees, and his hands under his chin.

"My mother has peculiar views on the subject, which—I say it in all respect—disqualify her to give me good advice. She thinks I ought to have the whole estate. I am afraid she would not like the idea of my asking for a salary out of it. She comes of a proud race, you know, and (with a smile) has the most unpractical and unbusiness-like ideas, but the warmest heart in the world."

"I was telling Mrs. Raynor to-day that I liked you because you don't cry over spilt milk," said the doctor, without looking up.

"Thanks; but you see it wasn't *my* milk that was spilt; so why should I cry?"

"That's the sensible view to take of it. Stick to that, and don't let anybody talk nonsense to you about family pride. Your

people on your mother's side have had enough of pride."

"Poor mother! mighty little else came to her."

"If your grandfather had had the sense to put some of it in his pocket, they might have gone back to their own country and lived comfortably upon their property; instead of——Bah! I've no patience with people who run their heads against a brick wall, and quarrel with their bread and butter for *pride!*" The doctor got excited, and poked the fire.

"What was that about spilt milk?" asked the younger man maliciously.

"Never you mind. Let's get back to that business which brought you here."

The doctor rose, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and stood with his back to the grate—an attitude he was wont to assume at all seasons when about to lay down the law. He thought for awhile. Then he took up Sir Stephen Willford's letter and re-read it.

"We were speaking of the postscript," suggested Percy, breaking the silence.

"Don't interrupt!" said Doctor Raynor. "Now look here, I'm not one of those who like to make mischief, I hope. Who was it who said that a postscript was often like a scorpion's tail—the place where the sting is? You've found this out for yourself, or I wouldn't——now there's another thing. Do you come to me, merely as a friend, to ask what I think of this letter?"

"No, sir, I came to ask you as Bessie's father."

"Good! So Bessie is the lady to whom ——no, I won't repeat the phrase which seems so to tickle Sir Stephen. You want to marry Bessie?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

The words look cold and common-place on paper. The doctor saw nothing common-place or cold in the face of the speaker, and thought that they rang like true metal.

"Good again! I like you to be frank, and we've only half an hour, you know.

To begin with, Bessie don't quite belong to us. Her aunt has taken possession of her. She has expectations from her aunt."

"I never thought of that."

"You've got to think of it. You've got to ask yourself if the position you asked of your cousin is one into which a girl, spoiled by two seasons in London, and God knows what sort of nonsense put into her head, could settle down into, and be happy."

"There is not the difference between town and country now that there used to be," said Percy.

"That's true."

"And I suppose I could take my wife to London sometimes."

"To the cattle show?" growled the doctor.

"Yes, and to Her Majesty's drawing-rooms upon occasion," replied Percy quietly. "She would not be the first Mrs. Tremayne who has been there."

"Give me your hand, my boy. I like that. It was a dirty sneer of mine about

the cattle show. I'm sorry. Well, what does Bessie say?"

"I have not spoken to her yet. I thought it right to come to you first."

"That was the old-fashioned way. I congratulate you upon sticking to it. What do you think she'll say when you do?"

"I think she likes me. I hope that in time—that perhaps——"

"Yes, yes; I understand," interrupted the Doctor, "but we've shunted business. Let's get back to Willford's letter. The letter is fair enough taken alone; but that infernal postscript shows the cloven hoof. Boiled and peeled, and simmered down in its own sauce, it comes to this: 'I will not give you a definite position, or a fixed income, because I want to keep you dependent. Marry; take your wife to a house which isn't your own, and live upon what I please to allow you—and you will be more under my thumb than ever. I pretend not to read or understand accounts;

but can tell to two-pence what was spent upon improvements two years ago. I tell you to take what you want; but give you clearly to understand that you must send me more money than usual (and consequently take less. yourself) for the future.' That is what it means! He knows what those improvements were."

"They were for almost rebuilding the house."

"Of course. He knows they will not return a shilling, unless it's let, and he offers it to you! Percy, he looks to coming back, or he never would have sanctioned that outlay."

"The whole place would have tumbled down if he hadn't."

"What would that have mattered to him, if he never meant to live there?"

"That is true," mused Percy.

"Read between the lines, Willford's letter means what I have said. I know him. Now I'll tell you what to do—I'm not speaking as Bessie's father, we must

leave her out of this till things are a good bit more clear—but as a friend. Write again, and take the bull by the horns. Say in so many words, 'send me by return mail an appointment as your land-agent at one thousand pounds a year for five years certain; or I quit the place this day three months,' that's notice enough."

"And if he take me at my word—I mean, if he refuse?" Percy asked with dry lips and a beating heart. Leave Warnstead! give up all hope of Bessie! be thrown upon the world with nothing but his brains to help him! The contingency was not a pleasant one to contemplate.

"I don't think he will refuse," said the doctor dryly.

"He might. Remember that he has no reason to like me. No one likes the man who was intended to supplant him; of course, I serve his interests more fully perhaps, more honestly, than an utter stranger would; but he might not think so."

"My dear Percy, if it suit him to throw you over, he'll do so at any moment. Be sure of that. There's not a drop of generosity in the Willford blood. Do you think old Sir William took you up because he loved you, or wanted to benefit you? Not a bit of it. He did so to spite his son, and please himself—not you. His son will use you as long as you are necessary, and when you are not, he'll throw you away like the stump of a cigar. Therefore I say don't trust him. Tie him up over his signature to a contract, and if he won't be tied, break with him. You'll never be younger than you are, and it will be easier to begin again now than hereafter."

Begin again! Here was a man who had already made two beginnings, and could not be blamed because they led to nothing. Left fatherless as a child, and ignored by all his relatives, the indomitable spirit and perseverence of his mother gave him education, whilst she often hungered

for bread. He won an exhibition from a famous public school, won a scholarship at Oxford, and was surely winning his way to a first class and a fellowship, when he was sent for to reign at Warnstead. For three years he lived there as its future owner, and when we first meet him, he has been there just as long as its unrecognised land agent. He left the university at twenty, so you know his age. Rather hard to have to "begin again" for the third time at twenty-six! Harder still to hear such an eventuality mentioned by a man whose daughter he wants to marry!

But the doctor gave good advice. Percy's position was not such a very bad one, so long as he was content to remain a bachelor. As a man in love he had to know the worst, and then work for a better fortune.

"I'd ask you to stay dinner," said Doctor Raynor, "but perhaps under all the circumstances——you understand?"

"Perfectly. I go to my mother to-morrow, and may stay a fortnight. It

will be three weeks before I can get an answer."

"From Willford?"

"From Willford."

"Let me see it when it comes," said the doctor; "and in the mean time, I hope I may trust you not to ask *another* question?"

"You may, sir."

"That's a good fellow! Let things go on just as usual; only don't imagine that it all depends upon your cousin. You've Bessie to reason with, and Bessie's aunt. *I* won't answer for either. They may have picked up some duke as a son-in-law for me, for anything *I* know."

Percy Tremaine rode back over the snow to Warnstead rather troubled by that last shot of the doctor's. Bessie to reason with, and Bessie's aunt! Bessie was not the sort of girl to whom one could offer love in a cottage, and as to Bessie's aunt—the less one spoke of love to her the better. She did not believe in love. Her favourite

materials for bearable wedding bonds were title deeds, diamonds, and the three per cents. He shut his teeth and drew a long breath as the house came into sight standing up, huge and solid, against the winter sky. Ah! if he could have gone a wooing as squire of Warnstead, how differently might that half-hour with papa in the study have ended!

He went in, and eat his solitary dinner in one of the two solitary rooms which had life in them, of all that great pile. A square, high-pitched, well-like place it was, with faded tapestry on the walls, and a covey of ugly Cupids sprawling over the ceiling. Here it was that six years ago he had been received by old Sir William, and told to consider himself his heir; and here it *is* that he keeps his books of account and writes his letters as young Sir Stephen's agent! A falling-off indeed! But it was only since he had begun to think of Bessie as a wife, that he realised the immensity and significance of it. Light came his

fortune, and lightly it had flown! It seemed to be a pleasant lot enough, at first, to be agent—such an agent as he was, one whom half the county treated as the squire. Some hurts do not begin to disable until we want to use all our strength—and this was one of them. His heart began to harden against Sir Stephen. If he had only done what ordinary good feeling—nay, as it now appeared to his cousin—ordinary *honesty* should have dictated; how smooth the course of true love might have run! Thus mused the man whom Doctor Raynor liked because he didn't cry over spilt milk, the man who had no "rights." Well, there are rights and rights. The doctor was speaking as he walked home with Mrs. Raynor, of such as may be judicially recognised and enforced; and of these Percy Tremayne had none. His wife was thinking of such as bind in conscience and in honour, and which society is not without the means of establishing after a fashion. Let us see

how he stands as regards these, as he lights his pipe, and sits down to write to New York as prescribed by Doctor Raynor.

Old Sir William had absolute power over the Warnstead property. For reasons to be explained hereafter, he decided to disinherit his only son, and to make Percy Tremayne his heir. As such he presented him to the county, as such he bade his servants obey him, as such he gave over to him the sole management of the estate. He had a will drawn up, leaving to him everything he possessed——*but he never signed it.* "Any time will do for that;" he told his lawyer, as he locked it up in his desk. He was a hale old man, sound and active—might live another twenty years. He was killed within three, in a railway accident. So everything went *by accident* to the legal heir—the son, and with it, as some held, an obligation to carry out his father's wishes—at least in part. Percy had a "right," they thought, to be handsomely provided for.

Now for the other side. Arguing for Sir Stephen, it was urged that his father had wrongfully condemned him. But for that mistake, he would have lived at Warnstead as heir apparent, and Percy have never entered its gates. But for that mistake Sir William would not have given instructions for the disinheriting will. The accident of not signing it only put matters right again. Mr. Tremayne had certainly met with a serious disappointment, for which, however, he could blame no one but the dead. For Sir Stephen to divide the property, or anything like that, would simply be to acknowledge that his father had acted justly, and to condemn himself.

So you see the whole thing turns upon the question, "What had Stephen Willford done?"

CHAPTER III.

WITH MAMMA.

"PAPA'S got Mr. Tremayne in the study, ma, and I'll bet you anything you like it's all about me."

I repeat the speech which in theatrical parlance "brought on" Bessie in mamma's room upstairs, as Percy was having his half-hour with papa below.

Mrs. Raynor had ceased to be astonished at the manner in which her daughter rapped out things about which young people did not talk when that lady was a girl. She

only stopped dressing, and tried to find in the face of the speaker some clue to the feelings which followed from this discovery. She might as well have sought them from the photograph on the wall. Not a flush on the broad white brow—not a quiver on the full firm lips. Nothing but the faintest possible contraction of the opal-ringed eyes. The scrutiny over, Mrs. Raynor went on with her toilet, as she didn't know what to say. So Bessie re-commenced.

"I thought p'r'aps papa would ask him to stay and dine, so I put on some war-paint."

"My *love!* if you only knew how it spoils the complexion, and how vulgar it is to paint."

"You dear, literal, innocent mamma! War-paint isn't rouge. It's this, and this, and this," she laughed, touching silk and gold and lace.

"Would it please you if papa were to ask him to stay and dine?" asked her mother, after a pause.

"Well—eh—yes. He's pretty good fun, but you know he's only a Detrimental."

"A what?"

"A Detrimental."

"What is that?"

"And here," cried Bessie, throwing up her hands in mock amaze, "here is the grown-up mother of two marriageable young women, who don't know what a Detrimental is! Really, mamma, you should be more attentive. Detrimentals—you best of antediluvian parents—Detrimentals are, as a rule, the nicest people out—soldiers, barristers, artists, men in the F. O. and the Treasury, who talk well, and waltz divinely, but haven't got any money. And, mamma, dear, the *very* nicest have such a strange expression—a sort of hunted look—in their faces when they are not talking to you. There's always some money-lender or some dreadful woman after them."

"I hope to goodness, Bessie, you don't go on in this way with Mary?" was her mother's comment upon this lesson.

"Poor dear Mary! Of course not. Detrimentals, in short, are men who can't marry, and may flirt, thus shutting out those who can marry, and want to. Detrimental to matrimony, don't you see? One has to marry something."

"No, my dear, some*body*."

"Somebody with something, then. Now, Percy Tremayne has not got anything, and is nice, therefore he is a Detrimental."

"Bessie, my child, I wish you would be serious and candid with me. What has passed between you and Mr. Tremayne?"

"Lots of flowers, and such beauties!"

"Oh, Bessie! when you see that I am serious and anxious! You know very well what I mean. Why, even your father noticed it."

"O—h!" said Bessie, rounding her lips, and arching her brows. "I see! Then it's papa talking to Percy, and not Percy gone to have it out with papa! My! how I would like to bore a hole through here" (tapping the carpet with the point of her

slipper), "and see the fun! Ma, you must know, for you all three came home together: is it papa at Percy, or Percy at papa?"

"Ask your own heart."

"It won't answer. Ma, dear, please leave off struggling with that hair—I'll do it for you presently—and come and sit down here, there's a darling! Now, tell me, what were they talking about as you came along?"

"Percy said he wanted to consult your father about something, that was all."

"So Percy began it. Did he look—like—like—well, like a man who is going to—do anything—desperate?"

"I will not be catechised, Bessie."

"Don't mention catechising, *please.* It reminds me of, Who gave you that name? and, What is your duty to your neighbour? Ma, do you know I once won two dozen of gloves on my duty to my neighbour. I *did!* I couldn't have won it from you, you dear old exact thing! I left a lot out,

but he—the fellow who lost the bet—didn't know any better, and paid up."

"And you took what you had not earned?"

"Of course. Men don't bet with girls to win."

"I am sorry that they bet at all on such subjects, and more sorry still that your aunt should allow——"

"Oh, aunty knows what she's about, mamma. If there is only one woman in the world who knows exactly what she is about, it's aunty. She told me all about Percy when he was in London last June. His father was a captain in the navy, and his mother a countess, who takes in sewing somewhere near Leicester Square. He went to Oxford, got cheated by old Willford, is quite a dear, and has not a sixpence."

"Well, Bessie, I could not presume to contradict such a wonderfully clever person as your Aunt Rose, so let us drop the subject," said her mother.

"But isn't it so?"

"If your Aunt Rose says it is, of course it must be."

"Don't tease. Aunt Rose didn't say so word for word, and one always touches up a little. Now" (and she ticked off the heads of her questioning on her rosy finger tops as she went on), "his father was a captain in the navy?"

"No; a commander."

"It's all the same. You call a commander a commander, and see how cross he'll be! Well, and his mother was a French lady?"

"No; an Italian; but you called her a countess just now."

"That was ornamental."

"And the sewing also, I suppose?"

"They were very poor, I heard, dreadfully hard up, especially after Captain Tremayne's death."

"So they were; but the widow did not sew for a living: she painted. Go on."

"And he went to Oxford?"

"Right, for a wonder."

"And was cheated by old Willford?"

"No. Sir William Willford had the best intentions towards him, but died before they were carried out."

"And—what was the next article, ma?" asked Bessie, pausing on her right hand thumb.

"'Is quite a dear,' was what you *said*," Mrs. Raynor replied, dryly. "If that means he is well born, well educated, well looking, and well behaved, I agree with you; he *is* a dear."

"And hasn't got a sixpence?"

"How many sixpences are there in a thousand pounds?"

"Oh, gracious! Twice twenty, and a thousand times that—why, forty thousand, to be sure."

"Well, he's got a position which is worth what makes this famous Aunt Rose forty thousand times wrong," said her mother, with that calmness which victory gives, and hurts so, when one knows it for what it is—sugar-coated spite.

"I did not say he had a thousand a year," mused the doctor's wife to herself, as she rose to resume her dressing, "but he may get it soon."

You who are mothers yourselves know what this one is driving at. You would not love an Aunt Rose who had taken your girl from you, and her girlishness from her; had let her win bets on the catechism, and learn so much about Detrimentals. You would scheme a little, I fancy, or even tell a white fib or two, to get the child back again, and have her married and settled near you, and out of Aunt Rose's way.

Bessie kept her promise, and "did" her mother's hair, but in a style which called forth repeated protests from that lady.

"Oh! what will your father say?" she cried, as the result was reflected with a hand-glass.

"That you're the prettiest old lady in the county," was the spoiled one's reply.

Then, all at once, and apropos of nothing, she harked back to Percy.

"Aunt Rose says he's a sort of gentleman bailiff to Sir Stephen. Is that true?"

"He manages the estate, and every one treats him as a gentleman. Many young men of excellent family manage estates."

"And get a thousand a year?" said the girl, as though speaking to her own thoughts.

"I'm sure that Percy is very lucky. What with being rent free, and having the run of the garden, and stable, and cellar, and all that, and being so looked up to."

"Ah! but how long will it all last?"

"Years and years."

"Suppose Sir Stephen were to come home, and manage for himself?"

"My dear, he mustn't," Mrs. Raynor replied, dropping her voice.

"Mustn't come back to his own house!"

"No, dear."

"Why not?"

"Because he is bound not to do so."

"I don't understand. I can't make this out a bit," said Bessie, getting more excited than her mother had seen her for many a day. "First you tell me that old Sir William did not cheat Percy, but wanted to give him everything; and then you make out he is only managing the place on a salary, and Sir Stephen mustn't come back, and—what *does* it all mean, mamma? If Warnstead really belongs to Sir Stephen, why may he not come and live there? I thought he went abroad because his father made him, and stayed away because he didn't like England."

"He stays away because he must."

"But why—why?"

"It's too long a story to tell you now, my dear. He cannot come back as long as Mr. Dennis lives."

"Mr. Dennis! What on earth has he to do with it? I thought that the Dennises and the Willfords were sworn enemies from generation to generation, and did not speak?"

"Did Mrs. Rose tell you so?"

"Now it's no use pretending she's wrong again there. Long before I went to London I heard you and papa talking about it —about the law suit."

Mrs. Raynor, who had begun to look alarmed, gave a sigh of relief.

"That did not mend matters; but the trouble was of older standing. I could not tell you all the details, even if I wanted to, for I'm not clear about them myself; but this much is certain—Sir Stephen cannot come to Warnstead as long as Mr. Dennis lives. Poor Percy behaved admirably under the circumstances, and tried his best to make peace, but Mr. Dennis was resolute."

"I hate resolute people. It's only another word for spite married to obstinacy; but I'm glad Percy behaved well."

"And it was against his own interests—mind that."

"Of course. He'd be nobody if the other returned. Does pa know all about it?"

"Yes."

"I'll make him tell me."

"You can ask him."

"If Percy had gone on as he began at Oxford, he would be somebody now," Bessie mused.

"Oh, my child! be frank with your mother. Has anything passed between you? Do you love him?"

"Don't you think, mamma, that I had better not answer such a question till he asks it? Did girls, when you were young, go to their mothers and say that they loved their—somebodies, before their somebodies asked them? Wouldn't it be slightly awkward if the somebody didn't ask after all?"

"I shall not seek to force your confidence, dear," replied Mrs. Raynor. "You can keep it for your Aunt Rose."

"That's unkind!"

"As you will. It's the last word I shall say on the subject."

She turned aside, and the next thing

that happened surprised her. Her daughter's arms were round her neck, and a hot, tear-stained face pressed against her bosom.

"Oh, darling! you don't know what a hateful thing I am. I know what's good and right, and I know what seems pleasant, and—and——"

"Hush! hush! Bessie. What is right is always pleasant in the end."

"Ah! but the end is always so far off—dim, so doubtful."

"I didn't find it so when I married your father."

"You were the dearest old Darby and Joan," said Bessie, dashing aside her tears, and relapsing into her old reckless way; "and had lovely children, and got to be very nicely off, and all that. Only times have changed. It's nice to have one's things made to order; they fit better, though one has to wait for them, and try on, and find fault, and take a lot of trouble. But one likes a ready-made for-

tune, mamma dearest. Girls begin now a length or two ahead of where their mothers finished."

"I think I understand you, Bessie, and I'm sorry."

"For me?"

"Yes, dear, for you. I have noticed, and so has your father, the marked attention Mr. Tremayne has paid you; and certainly your conduct towards him has not been that of one who did not appreciate it."

"Speak out—say I have flirted."

"No. I will not say anything so light. I say that you have treated him unfairly. It may be fashionable; but it's unkind, untrue, unwomanly."

"Why, what *have* I done?"

"You have given him every encouragement."

"Well?"

"Enough of this! You have vexed me, and made me say more than I intended. Go your own way, child. Hark! What was that noise?"

"The hall door."

"Then he has gone."

"Who?"

"Why, Percy."

"And papa has not asked him to dinner! I hope he has got something to eat at home."

"Home! Poor fellow! What a home!"

"I think Warnstead would make a delightful home—with all things in proportion," said Bessie.

The doctor's dinner circle was a wide one. Grown-up Mary, grown-up Bessie, a "man" son from Cambridge, and two boys from school. The talk was of the decorations we know of; and before their repast was over, the rector came in to have a serious conversation with Bessie.

The rector was a slim little man, with no-coloured hair, furtive eyes, and a weak chin, which he was constantly prospecting with a finger and thumb, as though doubtful that it had not got away somehow.

Bessie had gone too far, he said. He had really not contemplated anything so elaborate when he gave his consent. That cross, now. He was not at all sure that people would like that cross. Might he venture to have it taken down, for he was afraid that the bishop——

"That for the bishop!" cried Bessie. "Wait till next September, and I'll show him. I'll have a Harvest Home, with full choral service, and a cross of wheat and poppies five times as big, and he shall preach the sermon!"

"I am so sorry; but I really think I must insist," began the rector.

"Pull down my cross, and I'll pull down all the rest," said Bessie, folding her arms.

Then the rector tried to mount the high horse. He was not accustomed to be spoken to like that. He allowed no interference in his church, etc., etc. But the stirrups were too lofty, and he never reached the saddle.

Bessie wheedled. How could so clever a man allow himself to be talked over by a lot of *old* women. She (Bessie) knew who had been interfering. It was those two old cats, the Tompkins, and that odious Susan Price—jealous because they had not had a finger in the pie. Then she told him of a bishop who had taken her into dinner once in London, and was *so* nice; who talked decorations, and said it was the *duty*—those were his very words—the duty of young ladies to make the churches pretty at Christmas.

They were left alone for this discussion. The doctor retired to his study to smoke, and thither his wife followed. She had not eaten the dinner of a red-breast, in her anxiety to know what Percy Tremayne had said. Had he proposed for Bessie?

"Well, yes, and no," said her better-half; and then they told each other what had passed upstairs and down.

"I'm afraid she don't care a pin for him," said mamma.

"The more fool she," growled papa. "Is there any one else?"

"I'm afraid not," sighed mamma. "I'm afraid she thinks of nothing but herself."

CHAPTER IV.

THE DENNISES AND THE WILLFORDS.

THE Dennises and the Willfords had been neighbours for more than a century, and never friends. They were of about the same standing in the county, of about the same means, and had about the same following—each in his way. This had not been always so. The Willfords were famous for going with the times. They never exactly "ratted" in the vulgar way, or changed their course in the eyes of all observers; but somehow were always ready with sails trimmed, to catch the breeze that was coming. They had been

prerogative men with Charles I; shining lights under the Protectorate; cavaliers with the merry Monarch; orange of the deepest dye when his brother ran away, and threw the great seal into the Thames. Afterwards they had been Whig and Tory alternatively, with great success, and when clever people began to see that there was a great future for the Nonconformists, the Sir William Willford so often mentioned, returned to the faith of his great grandfather. Every change feathered the Willford nest. They got their baronetcy from James II., a rich patent office for three generations from Marlborough, a seat in Parliament from Pitt, and a bishopric from Lord Melbourne. They were "smart," these Willfords.

The Dennises were wild, but lucky. I am sorry—as a moral writer—to say that their rise was due more to luck than good management. They had a talent for getting into political hot water. If the water was not hot already, they heated it. They

went for the old Pretender; were out in the '45; were Wilkites, Reformers, Radicals —everything that was unprofitable—but they prospered. Under a lot of scrub land (which at one time was worth nothing an acre) was discovered coal and iron-stone, and the more was dug out, the more was found behind. As they prospered, they steadied down. In the race of life the more weight you carry, the faster you go.

The Reform Bill cost the Willfords their seat in Parliament. Previous to 1832, Warnstead was a borough, and had three voters—the butler, the head game-keeper, and their master. The election took place in the great dining-room. The butler proposed and the game-keeper seconded the squire or his nominee. Nothing could be simpler or more unanimous. No trouble, no speechifying, no chance of a petition. Warnstead went glimmering into the things that were in company with Gatton and Old Sarum. King's Morton was given

a member, and chose a Dennis, and kept him for years, until late in our own times, when the party of the sitting member got into trouble, and a seat, more or less, became a matter of importance. Of all the safe seats, King's Morton was considered the safest. The candidate had only to be a Dennis, to walk over. Sir William Willford was strong amongst the dissenters in the town, but the country was Dennis to a man.

The nomination—(there were nomination days then, and eggs for unpopular candidates), was fixed for a Wednesday. On the previous Monday, Mr. Dennis went down to his committee-room, earlier than usual. No one had yet arrived. The post had come in, and there was a packet on the table addressed to him by name. He opened it, and out fell a huge poster, printed in red letters, a foot high. Some new phase of DENNIS FOR EVER! or VOTE FOR DENNIS—he thought—a proof of which the printer had submitted. But

inside the wrapper was a letter which ran thus:

"Five hundred copies of the enclosed will be posted to-morrow *if necessary*—one on your gates.

"RETRIBUTION."

The huge poster was an invention of the enemy then. He picked it up, spread it out, and read one of the shortest commandments in the decalogue. It had nothing to do with murder or stealing. He had killed no woman's peace of mind, or stolen the rights of any man. He was a happy father—a proud and true husband, and yet the sight of those words made his heart sick, and sent his blood creeping cold, and then surging like fire through his veins.

Twelve years before this, a worn-out adventurer, a thing that had not even passion as an excuse, won a friendless girl who had a small fortune. He spent her money, and he wrecked her life. This

done, he abandoned her, and finding it convenient for another matrimonial speculation to die, he departed this vale of tears, and started again in life under another name. His widow became Mrs. Dennis, and had her reward. His wife (No. 2) gave him his, by eloping with a sergeant in the Life Guards. Then the scoundrel saw that there was something to be made out of No. 1, but it was rather late. He had about half one lung left, and was familiar with snakes. If you do not know what "snakes" can do for a man, read *Mrs. Skaggs' Husbands*, by Bret Harte. But he did all the mischief he could. He told a tale which cross-examination could have torn to rags, got ten pounds to hold his tongue as to what was really true (in that he had lied in saying, four years ago, that the devil had got his own) spent the money in brandy, and got one snake too many.

The threatened suit for a divorce died with the petitioner, but it so happened

that a clerk in the office of his attorney (with whom, by-the-by, he broke faith by taking those ten pounds) "bittered himself" and took service with the parliamentary agents who acted for Sir William Willford. The ruling maxim of this young man was *succeed*—never mind how, and there was a douceur of a hundred guineas to be got by succeeding at this election.

What share—if any—Sir William had in dragging its hidden skeleton out of his opponent's happy home, was never rightly measured. After the mischief was done, he wrote what some of his friends called "a very handsome letter," to Mr. Dennis, in which he declared upon his honour that he ignored, repudiated, and deplored what had happened.

"Can you fight it down?" asked the chairman of John Dennis's committee, to whom, as in duty bound, he showed the placard and accompanying threat.

"Yes," he said, "*but it would kill my wife.*"

"The scoundrel writes he will post a copy on your gate. He strikes at you through her."

"And she—God help me!—does not even *yet* know that her first husband was alive when we married. It was all kept from her. We were married abroad, and I pretended that it would be better for the child we expected, for us to go through a civil marriage in England. She considered it as a mere form to record the religious ceremony. What *is* to be done?"

What indeed! There are some loathsome creatures crawling about this fair world, which become more loathsome yet, as we crush the life out of them. There are forms of cowardice which ennoble. John Dennis took the only safe course. What to him was party or prestige in comparison to a loved and loving wife's peace? He withdrew his name as a candidate for the honour of representing the free and independent electors of King's Morton, and the

lord of Warnstead won the prize of his life.

The reason given for Mr. Dennis's retirement was that the health of his wife required them to live in a milder climate for the next two years at least. The doctors had ordered her to the south of France or Madeira, and this was perfectly true. She had been ailing for some time, but was one of those cheerful, uncomplaining women, whom cheerfulness and pluck kept up to the last. She made the doctors promise not to tease her husband; she would get strong again in the spring. As good luck would have it, Doctor Raynor dropped into the committee-room that morning on purpose to catch Mr. Dennis, and tell him he could no longer obey his wife, and keep her real condition from him. If she passed another winter in King's Morton he would not answer for the consequences. This settled it.

But a political party does not like to be thrown over at the last moment. Why

had not "Dennis for Ever" found out this before? A pretty time to resign! What were madam's lungs to Mr. Swop, the grocer, who was looking for a place in the excise for his son-in-law; or to Mrs. Stamper, who hoped that her vote would get her an extra twenty pounds a year for keeping the post office? There was plenty of grumbling, speculation, and surmise, and at last the miserable truth oozed out, the opposite of heaven knows how. Perhaps the young man from Great George Street, intoxicated by success—or gin—had boasted of his cleverness; perhaps the printer of the placard could not keep a secret.

The scandal became public property, and then, and not till then, did Sir William Willford ignore, repudiate, and deplore it. It reached its object, and to his dying day John Dennis believed that his prophecy was a true one—that it killed her. Certain it is that her malady took a severer form soon afterwards, notwithstanding her removal to a warmer clime, and the summer

sun, which was to have made her stronger, shone only on her grave.

In the mean time the inevitable defence had been made, and the equally inevitable reaction followed. Sir William found that his triumph was a dear one. Only a select band believed he had nothing to do with that placard. He was just one of those cold-blooded, self-righteous men, who could do such a thing, and think that he had pleased God thereby. Besides, he bore several grudges against Dennis.

This takes us back to the first feud in the present generation—between Dennis and Willford.

A Willford had once owned those lands full of hidden coal and ironstone, from which Dennis now drew the greater part of his wealth. A railroad company, of which Sir William was a director, wanted a thin slice of them, and the owner was obliged to sell; but when it came to making a title, not a scrap of parchment would John Dennis produce. Sixty years adverse possession—

two hundred and sixty, if required—was his title. If they liked it, they could take it, and if they didn't, they could let it alone. He did not want to sell. They took the land, and filed a bill in Chancery against him, to force a disclosure of deeds which they averred did, would, should, and ought to exist, and if not, why not, and how otherwise? But he beat them. Sixty years adverse possession is a mighty good title to hold by—the railroad company did not want a better—but its director had found out something which suited him to follow up. Its attorney had unearthed an old deed of grant made by King James I. of blessed memory (did he not root up witchcraft, and put out all the tobacco pipes?) to one, Stephen Willford, of an estate which included the lands now in question. The high Court of Chancery was prayed to make John Dennis play a parchment against that. "Sixty years adverse possession," repeated John Dennis, as doggedly as Samuel Jones, his attorney, could

put it; and "bill dismissed, with costs," said the Master of the Rolls.

The case made quite a stir in King's Morton, and people took sides. The railway—it was soon discovered—was but the stalking horse. The real fight was Willford against Dennis. There was the Wouldn't-ites and the Couldn't-ites. It's absurd said the Wouldn't-ites, to expect a man of John Dennis's position to rake out the contents of his monument chest at the will and pleasure of a common carrier, because he wants a beggarly acre or two of his land. He's quite right to refuse. My dear sir—whispered the Couldn't-ites—you may rest assured that if this young man was *able* to comply with the company's demand, he would be very glad to do so. What? a county gentleman content to show no better title than a gipsy squatter! Depend upon it there is a screw loose somewhere.

But the young man stuck to his text "I am the grandson and heir-at-law of

John Dennis, who was the eldest son and heir-at-law of another John Dennis, and that's enough. My great grandfather, my grandfather and I, have held this land against all the world. Any one who buys it of me can do the same. This is the ground I take — move me if you can." And they couldn't.

John Dennis had only recently come into his property, and young as he was, was married. His father had died in his grandfather's lifetime, and he had had a minority of some five years during which the Willfords enjoyed undisputed sway. It made Sir William sore to think that one of the first acts of "that forward boy," as he called his hereditary rival; was to beat him. Well, they might have a return match—that was some consolation. There was a possibility of picking holes even in the Statute of Limitations, and time might show where that reputed loose screw was. He named a son (who was born to him about this time, after some years of matri-

mony unblessed with male issue) Stephen, after King James's grantee. There was luck he thought in the name. One Stephen Willford had obtained the property, and another might regain it. Regain not only those "beggarly acres," lately in question, but the whole rich estate. When he grew up that Stephen Willford the second should study the law, and find out the weak joint in the enemy's coat of mail, if it had not been discovered before.

If you have skipped this episode, you had better turn back and read it; or shut up the book. According to the Statute of Limitations a man who has held land as his own for twenty years against every one able to turn him out, acquires an absolute right to it. Infants *i.e.* young ladies and gentlemen under age, are not "able" litigants. Add forty to the twenty and you provide against two generations of possible minors, and are pretty safe. Now the Willford who took that royal grant died in the year 1626. The statute aforesaid

does not "run"—as the lawyers say—against people who live "beyond the seas." They also are not "able," but this exception did not help the family at Warnstead for four generations of them had been born and died there.

Under these circumstances Sir William's lawyers advised him to give up all thoughts of ousting John Dennis; but the hope, born of the wish, remained; until he became almost a monomaniac upon the subject and made a genealogist of his heir as soon as he could read.

The "forward boy" won his law-suit, and jumped over his elder rival's head into the high places which his forefathers had filled, one after the other: M.P. for King's Morton, chairman of the County Sessions, High Sheriff of the county—to say nothing of master of the county foxhounds which was not in Sir William's line. Baronet as he was, this gentleman found that he had to "take a back seat,"—and he did not like it. He was known to have done

several dirty things in a strictly pious way to people whom he did not like; so that when the electioneering scandal we know of came out, a good many people shook their heads, and even his own party wished he had spoken sooner.

His first impulse was certainly not to deplore the news. If it were true young John Dennis was illegitimate, there would be no male Dennis left to defend the coveted wealth when his father died. This amicable hope was nipped in the bud when all the facts came out, and the second marriage was proved. Nor was his first act to repudiate the young man from Great George Street. He did not have him ducked in the nearest horse-pond, and kicked out of the town. He did not report him to his employers so that they might discharge him from their service as they would certainly have done; and he *did* give him the price of his success.

"No understrapper," said John Dennis, through his clenched teeth, when he had

signed his resignation, "would dare do such a thing without permission, and as there is a God above me I'll bring his master to a bitter reckoning! Some day I'll have him on the hip, and then——"

No one who could have seen the face of the speaker would have liked to change places with Sir William Willford.

After the death of his wife Mr. Dennis returned to his old home, and for the sake of his children resumed his position in the county—all but the seat for King's Morton. Nothing would induce him to contest that. Young John might, when he came of age; his father—never.

So things went on quietly enough until Stephen Willford and young John Dennis were both in their twenty-first year. Sir William was a man of sixty—John Dennis the elder twenty summers his junior, and rode to hounds like a boy. The baronet's mania for forcing the squire's title had only increased with his age. The squire

had not forgotten his vow. Only a spark was required to light up the old feud, and this was struck just six years and a month before Percy Tremayne wrote that letter to New York.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE HIP.

WHEN the Dennis-Willford feud burst out again, young John (usually called Jack) Dennis, was a full sub-lieutenant of light dragoons, and Stephen Willford a law student in his second year. The two young men had been brought up as differently as only sons—both heirs of fine estates—could possibly be. A boy, in the estimation of Sir William, was a sort of unconvicted criminal, who, unless watched, confined, and coerced, would give way to the original sin within him, and go straight to perdition. A boy,

according to Mr. Dennis, should be trusted, and left to rough it a little on his own account, so that if there were any vice in him, it might show itself, and be dealt with before it took root. Under these systems, Jack joined the depôt of his regiment a smart yonng officer, for whom snares of ordinary construction were spread in vain; and Stephen went to the Middle Temple a perfect greenhorn. Jack, familiar with the use of money since he was at school, knew when to keep it and when to spend it, like a gentleman; Stephen, obliged to account for every half-crown of an inadequate allowance, was forced into deceit to cover over unrighteous disbursements, and into practices which would have thrilled his father with horror to the core, to provide ways and means for even harmless expenditure. Jack had bought experience by retail; Stephen was "let in for it" all at once.

Playing cards and betting were Sir William's favourite detestations. He hoped

that by keeping his one ewe lamb short of cash, he would take the best means to keep his little fleece unspotted. Alas for such precautions! By this time Master Stephen had a book upon the principal events of the Turf, and was a professor of "loo."

Playing "loo" is an expensive accomplishment—doubly expensive. It is an accomplishment which costs a good deal to acquire, and acquired, becomes expensive to some one else, when played as Master Stephen played it. He had cast his bread upon the waters—in the shape of taking "miss" second-hand, and standing upon a ten of trumps, in his unsophisticated days—and it at last came back to him in pools provided by others. He now played a patient, cool game, and cultivated a fine scent for parties on which his skill would be likely to prevail. There was a good deal of "loo" playing in the Temple in Michaelmas Term, 1868.

An old schoolfellow of Jack Dennis was then called to the Bar. He had known

Jack "at home," had shot many a partridge and pheasant on Mr. Dennis's land, and was a prime favourite with that gentleman. You are "called" after dinner, and give a card-party, but your friends who are not of your Inn of Court may not dine with you. They come in when the Benchers have retired, drink your health, and usually adjourn to your chambers, and—make a night of it. Jack got leave, and came up from Canterbury to do his chum honour, and see how he looked in his wig.

"You're safe to be Lord Chancellor," he said, slapping Chris Tomlyn on the back, as they left the grand old hall, "if you look as wise as that for another forty years."

As he spoke, a fellow student of the coming judge sidled up, and asked leave to bring a friend. "Very nice person—good family and that; son of Sir William Willford, of Warnstead."

The speaker was a known tuft-hunter, and had himself sponged for an invitation, but, really, if a man cannot be friendly on

his "call" night, when can he be? Permission was given, and a general flank movement to Chris Tomlyn's chambers was made in good order.

Dessert discussed, and coffee over, the decks were cleared, and tables drawn out. Some sat down to whist, some preferred to talk, and others called for "loo." The host was, by preference, a whistite, but sacrificed himself to make a party for the livelier game. They sat down, seven—mine host, Jack Dennis, Stephen Willford, his introducer, Mr. Steadman, a rather noisy barrister named Plowden, and two others, named respectively Stark and Berresford. Now Jack and Stephen, though of course not on friendly, were on bowing terms—as indeed their fathers were—so that this meeting on neutral grounds was not embarrassing to either.

They began mildly—sixpences up, and the dealer eighteenpence—four and sixpence the "loo," nine shillings two "loos," and so on; quite enough for fun.

But even so the noisy barrister lost several pounds, and swore that the —— was in the cards. Hadn't Chris another pack? Chris had, and laughingly produced it, saying,

"It's the same pattern, though, and won't do you much good, I'm afraid, especially if you go on playing upon nothing."

"I shall play as I like, confound you!" said the victim, in good humour. "You win, and mind your business."

"Oh, I haven't won. No one has won much but Mr. Willford."

"You generally *do* win, I think," said Berresford, who had evaded an introduction to Stephen when the party assembled.

There was some horse play with the discarded pack, which got tossed about (a fair quantity of champagne had been tossed, too), but was eventually gathered up, placed on a sideboard, where a flagon of iced water stood, and on went the game with its successor of the same pattern.

"Didn't I tell you there was no luck in

that other pack?" laughed Plowden, as he landed two-thirds of a good pool. "Now these are excellent cards."

"When you hold the queen and knave," Willford replied, "most cards are."

He was by no means a winner now. That queen and knave "looed" him and another for three pounds each.

For this unusually rich pool there were four players, and another two loos followed. Twelve pounds in the pool! Unprepared for such a rise, they had agreed to play "club law," which means, my dear uninitiated readers, that every one must play when a club is turned up trumps. As there are only three tricks, there must be at least four Loos—with seven players—when all are "in." Clubs came up. Four Loos, four times twelve—forty-eight pounds in the pool, and Plowden happy!

Stephen Willford got up, crossed the room, and took a glass of iced water, whilst the cards were shuffled for the next deal.

Chris Tomlyn was dealer. Berresford was first hand, Steadman next, Willford next, then Plowden, Jack Dennis, and Stark, in their order, as I have named them.

"I don't play," said Berresford.

"I will," said Steadman.

"So do I," said Willford.

"Nothing to do with it," said Plowden.

Jack rapped on the table, and turned down his cards.

"Three players," said the dealer.

"Settle it amongst yourselves," said Stark, throwing up his hand.

Willford "played his own," Jack drew two cards, and so did Steadman.

"Well, I hope you fellows will divide," said the host, "this has got too high for amusement."

There are various rules of "loo." Those which this party played were: 1st. If you have the ace and the lead, lead it. 2nd. If you have two trumps lead the highest. 3rd. Beat the card played before you if you can.

4th. Always follow suit. 5th. When you have won a trick, lead a trump if you have one.

The nine of diamonds was the trump.

"Curse of Scotland!" cried Plowden, "no luck for me."

And he was right. He had two small spades and the king of hearts. No use going in on that.

The big pool caused a silence, and some of those who were not in the whist, gathered round to see it lost and won.

"Sixteen pounds a trick," said Plowden, "go it."

Steadman played the knave of spades. *He* hadn't two trumps.

Willford trumped it with the ten of diamonds.

Jack threw down the king of spades.

"One for Willford. Trump after trick," said Plowden getting excited. "Now comes the tug of war."

Willford played the ace of trumps.

Jack exclaimed, "The dev—" stopped short, and got very pale.

"What a hand!" said Plowden. "If it had been his lead, he'd have looed the lot. Go on, old man (this to Jack), you can't beat the ace of trumps."

"Of course not—if— Look here, Chris, there's some mistake."

"No mistake at all," cried impatient Plowden. "Steadman led a spade, Willford trumped it, you played your king. Now Willford leads the ace of diamonds. Do go on."

"I hold that card," replied Jack very quietly, "and here it is!"

As the playwrights have it—TABLEAU!

If a bomb-shell had fallen on the table, it could not have produced a greater effect than did that second little red figure in the centre of a harmless piece of pasteboard.

"The pack must be wrong," gasped the host. "I'm *so* sorry! Is it possible we have been playing with two aces of diamonds, without knowing it?"

It was possible. In "loo" the pack is never dealt out. With seven players only, more than thirty-one cards are seldom needed, including the trump. It was just possible. Chris counted. Fifty-two. Then what card was missing. He laid them out in suits. There was no three of clubs.

"I'll tell you how it is," said Chris, "when you fellows were larking with the old pack, the ace of diamonds must have got mixed up somehow—left on the table I suppose—with the new ones."

"Then where's the three of clubs," asked Berresford, the cynic.

As though by common consent all rose to look for it.

They found it under Stephen Willford's chair with the marks of the sole of a boot upon it.

There was a dead silence.

Plowden took up the other pack and examined it.

"No ace of diamonds here!"

"Well, I suppose we must play the hand over again," said Steadman.

"No, no," cried several at once. "This must be cleared up first."

"I shall certainly decline to play any more until it is," said Berresford.

"Really, really," expostulated Steadman —"amongst gentlemen——"

"The best may make a mistake," the cynic interrupted, "but there is no *mistake* here."

"By which, I suppose, you mean to insinuate that we are not all gentlemen?" said Willford, who had stood in sullen silence since the discovery of the card under his chair.

"I never insinuate," was the cutting reply, more to the company than the inquirer. "What I have to say I speak out; and I say this:—I will not sit down again with Mr. Willford."

"You made another spiteful remark before we began," muttered Willford through ashen lips. "Why accuse me?

It's between Mr. Dennis and myself. Do you refuse to play with Mr. Dennis ?"

"No, sir."

"And you call that fair ?"

"Look here! fair is fair—if you come to that," interposed Plowden. "Mr. Dennis sat opposite to me, drank his liquor, and smoked his bacca like a man. He didn't get up for water, *or anything else.*"

Then all remembered that Willford had gone for water, to the very spot where the discarded pack was.

"I'll answer for my friend," cried Steadmean. Tuft hunter as he was, he could be loyal to his tuft.

"And I for mine," said Chris.

All this time Jack Dennis had not said a word. It never struck him that he had to say anything. The mere possibility that he could be suspected of cheating never occurred to him. Not even when Willford said it was between them. There was some mistake. He thought it rather an impertinence of Mr. Plowden to take his part.

But after all—it was no business of his. He was a stranger to all but one. Let them fight it out amongst themselves. So he lit a cigar.

"You are all against me. I wish I'd never come," growled Willford. "I had that ace fairly, and I've a right to two-thirds of that pool."

"Let him take it," cried four voices, "and go."

"No, I won't, but if you like I'll play the hand over again."

"That is out of the question," replied the host. "Let every man withdraw his stake, and——"

"You shall hear from me about this, Mr. Tomlyn," Willford muttered.

"As you please, sir."

"Oh, I say, Chris, can't this be stopped?" It was Jack who spoke. "Mr. Willford is a neighbour of ours, as you know. Our governors ain't good friends and that, but —hang it! he's a gentleman. I don't suppose he'd be here if he wasn't. There's

some mistake. Why, suppose that card had been found under *my* chair! Would any man dare to—to— Oh! there's some mistake."

Dead silence!

"Well, it's no use staying here, Steadman," said his friend. "It will be a lesson to me not to play cards again with people who don't know how to lose their money."

"And with me not to play with those who know too well how to win other people's," said Berresford, as the door closed behind the pair. "My dear fellow," the speaker added to his host, "I know him. He always wins. And the event of to-night throws a curious light upon something I heard yesterday. He has young fellows to play in his own rooms, and his cards *are always of the same pattern.* Take your change out of *that!*"

"It's a bore to have one's night broken up by such a skunk," Plowden loquitur. "What do you say? It's early yet.

Shall we play that hand again without him?"

"Certainly we will."

And to it they fell, until the small hours.

* * * * *

John Dennis wrote to the newly-fledged counsel, congratulating him on his "call," and wishing him every success in the profession he had chosen.

In reply—for want of anything else to say, after thanks for good wishes—Chris wrote:—

"I suppose Jack has told you all about the rather unpleasant scene we had at my call party. I must own that at first I was sorry for young Willford, but have heard things since which make me fear he is a bad lot. I didn't like his trying to drag Jack into it. I say 'trying' because, although Jack was a stranger to everybody but myself, no one could look at him for a moment and think *he* could cheat at cards."

This was intended to make things pleasant for Jack; but it brought Jack's father up to town by the night express in a fury.

"Let it blow over!" he exclaimed, repeating his son's conclusion, when the whole story was told. "These things never blow *over*. They blow about, get magnified, distorted, and jump up again when you least expect them. Blow over! Would you leave the bite of a mad dog to blow over? I know these Willfords. In a week or two, their name will have slunk out of it, and yours be left in. The scandal will go from mouth to mouth, and some day it will be, 'Oh! Dennis of the ——th —I know; man who was mixed up in a card case in the Temple!' Good God, Jack! Mixed up in a card case! That's what will be said—only that; but the implication is mixed up in it as the cheat."

"I should like to hear any one say so!" Jack broke out.

"They don't *say* so. Be quiet. You cannot settle those sort of things with fists, or even pistols. I asked you just now, would you leave the bite of a mad dog to 'blow over?' No; you would burn it out as soon as ever you could heat an iron hot enough."

"But you see, dad," Jack observed, "I'm not bitten. None of the men said a word against me—ask Chris—and we went on playing when Willford left without the slightest trouble, and parted the best of friends. Don't you think that, under all the circumstances, it would be as well to let the fellow alone. *Qui s'excuse—s'accuse.*"

"You were a set of young fools to let him off so easily. If one of you had kicked him downstairs, it would have been all right. I'm old enough to be your father, Jack, and I know the world you live in. It don't bring logic and French proverbs to bear on these cases; it supplies rougher tests, and judges by results. It don't ask,

if they turn up again, who was right and who was wrong. It wants to know who had his nose pulled, or was expelled his club, or obliged to leave the country. If you can say, or your friends say for you, 'Yes, there was a card case in the Temple; Dennis, of the ——th, and Stephen Willford each held the ace of diamonds, and the latter's name was struck off the books of the Inn'—why, then you're safe. If you go upon your *blow over* principles, the least that will happen is for you both to be set down as blacklegs. Good God, Jack! Suppose it were to come to your colonel's ears, what would he say? I know. He'd hear you out, and then say, 'Well, sir, what have you done?'"

"What am I to do?"

Easy-going Jack hated the idea of making a fuss; but felt that his father was right. Something had to be *done.*

"State the case to the benchers of his Inn, and the committee of his club, —if he have one," replied Mr. Den-

nis, "as a commencement. When we know what they think of it, we shall be able to judge what else should follow."

CHAPTER VI.

BANISHED.

MR. STEADMAN was a small individual, with what he was pleased to consider large responsibilities. Any little pie into which he could manage to wriggle a finger, assumed in his eyes the dimensions of a royal pasty of exquisite flavour, and for which the mouth of all mankind were watering. His wit, like some rare vintages, required time to ripen; and thus it was that his choicest repartees, his most sarcastic thrusts, were produced the next morning, in the absence of their intended victim.

When he sought his couch on the night of Mr. Tomlyn's call party, he perceived how completely he might have turned the tables upon those who had assailed his friend. It was rather late, but not too late, to deal the necessary discomfiture. By his diplomacy, Stephen Willford might be pulled through with flying colours. And so he called on Stephen after breakfast. He found him in a curious frame of mind. Not angry with Chris, who had all but shown him the door; not indignant with Plowden, who had rapped out the most serious imputation against him; not seeking satisfaction from the cynical gentleman who had remarked at the outset that he generally *did* win; but furious against Jack Dennis, who alone had said a good word for him.

"How dared he put on those d——d supercilious ways? It was as much against him as me. Does he think that because he's an officer, and wears a fine uniform, that he's to run rough shod over me?

Let him look out! I know a good bit more about him than he thinks. D——d upstart! Let him look out, that's all!" fumed Stephen.

"Now, if you will place the affair entirely in my hands," Mr. Steadman began, first finger on thumb, "I will——"

"Leave me alone," was the ungracious reply; and beyond some further abuse of Jack, the speaker would not return to the subject.

Nevertheless, Mr. Steadman was not to be denied. If Willford did not know his own interests, so much the worse for him. He paid Chris Tomlyn a visit, and put forth all his little diplomacy. An expression of regret, however guarded, would, he felt sure, satisfy his friend. And it was really *so* desirable for all parties that the matter should be arranged, etc., etc., etc.

Chris thought so too, but at present he had no regret to express, other than that Mr. Steadman should have inadvertently introduced a person who was so unfor-

tunate as to incur the suspicion of every gentleman in the room.

Mr. Steadman had a "happy thought" half an hour afterwards, the result of which would have crushed Mr. Tomlyn to the earth. This was before the arrival of John Dennis.

The next day but one Chris had to return the visit, with Jack's (or rather his father's) ultimatum; and this was a thunderbolt! The poor little man could not cope with it alone—it was too great a responsibility. To advise—no matter how—would surely get him into trouble. The sane idea that he might wash his hands of it, and leave the principals to fight it out, like the Kilkenny cats if necessary, never occurred to him. It was one of his responsibilities.

He found out the barrister who had become Stephen's sponsor when he was entered as a student at law, and unbosomed his grief. That gentleman, not being prepossessed with the management of his in-

formant, and, like a sensible creature, unwilling to put his own fingers in the fire, wrote to Sir William, and so it all came out.

The reader has discovered, long before this, that there was some wisdom, but more spite, in the conclusions of John Dennis. Also, that the evidence against young Willford was far from conclusive. He had got up for water—he seldom drank wine—he went to the place where the rejected pack had been placed; but no one could say that he touched it, and half of them had their faces turned that way. A man who had stolen a good card, and wanted to get rid of a bad one, would hardly drop it under his own chair—would either pocket it, or throw it as far from him as possible. If the cynic had really heard "shady things" of Willford, why did he not warn his friends at once? Why did he sit down to play with a "leg." If it were a sin to have cards all of the same pattern, Chris Tomlyn—dear, honourable old Chris—was

a sinner. A man with any spirit in him would have knocked somebody down.

Well, Stephen Willford had no spirit in him. Any that he might once have had was squeezed out of him by his education. To become a good boy, he was made a sneak; to avoid one sort of temptation as a man, he was left naked and defenceless against the assaults of a dozen. He did play to win. What then? He lived upon his winnings, as any one who wields a steady cue, or plays a steady game, may do, and not forfeit his right to be considered a gentleman. There was a good deal to be said, you see, for Stephen Willford.

But he marred his own defence; was sullen when he should have been frank; vindictive when he ought to have been conciliatory; talked of actions at law, and prosecutions for libel, when the question was one of honour.

His father—aged, as we know, and prejudiced against all sorts of play—gave him

no help. A man who would play cards for money (according to Sir William) would cheat at cards for money. To play was to be a gambler—to be a gambler, a blackleg. His son had disobeyed his most earnest, most anxiously-pressed orders. That was bad enough. His son had placed him at the mercy of his hereditary enemy. That was his worst crime. And his hereditary enemy was pushing him home. Something had to be *done.* Would taking his name off the books of his Inn suffice? No. The heir of a baronetcy and twelve thousand a year might do that, and no one ask why. He was never intended to make his salt at the Bar. Would a written and signed acknowledgment that Sub-Lieutenant Dennis had played honourably, do? No; that was not required.

Oh! the sting in this refusal! John Dennis the elder was inexorable. What had to be done was to mark Stephen Willford's guilt; and the compact was made for him by one who admitted it, and dis-

owned him. He was to go abroad, and there remain; otherwise his case was to go before the benchers.

Unnatural! unjust! improbable! As you will. This is a novel. If you are reading it openly, if it has been brought home by papa, or ordered from the library by mamma, you have had no personal experience of how the Stephen Willfords of another world than yours are created, or what they may be made to endure. If you are reading it on the sly, you know, perhaps, how unnatural and unjust the sort of "serious person," like Sir William Willford, can be. His son was completely in his power. No entail, no settlement protected him to the value of a shilling, and there was no disposition to temper that power with mercy.

As soon as Sir William appeared on the scene, the case assumed a new aspect. The principals disappeared—Jack drifted out of it as accuser, Stephen was not heard in self-defence. His own father, acting upon

the principle already stated, pleaded guilty for him, and Jack's dictated the sentence.

When this was communicated to Stephen, he became frantic with rage, forced his way into Sir William's presence, upbraided, abused, and, as some said, struck him. Be this as it may, father and son never met again; and Percy Tremayne—the distant cousin—was sent for, to be made heir of Warnstead.

If the will already mentioned had been signed, Stephen would have received an annuity granted thus:—

To my son Stephen, who, after having disgraced and humiliated me by indulgence in a sin against which I had made it a life-long duty to warn him, accused me as the cause of his ruin—whose own hand has destroyed the ties of nature between us—who has not the ability to earn a living, or the honesty to deserve an inheritance, but whom I may not, as a Christian, leave to starve—I direct that my executor do pay, as I have done

hitherto, the sum of two hundred and fifty pounds, by four quarterly payments every year, so long as the said Stephen may continue to reside abroad.

Whether in his secret thoughts Sir William admitted that he had gone the wrong way to work with young men, and determined, however late, to change his course, or whether Percy went the right way to work with him, and would not put up with what his son had endured, matters not. There came a great change over Warnstead, at which people who had given Percy a six weeks' leave of favour, marvelled greatly. He hunted, shot, went to the county ball, and danced. He even ran up to town, avowedly to see the Derby—and came back welcomed!

The best of fathers and mothers sometimes fail to realize the fact that children grow into boys and girls, and these into men and women, with anything like the clearness with which the young people

themselves appreciate the change, or provide what the change requires. Stephen Willford gave his parent no assistance in this respect. He was a timid child; a frightened, sly boy; a spiritless, cunning man. He stood a rating, or sneaked to evade one, at twenty as at ten. The wholesome moral tonic of a big school was denied him. There was no break in his home tutelage. So it went on, unmodified by time.

But when Percy came to take his vacant place, there was a break indeed! Without ever failing in proper respect for his patron's age and position, he gave him very clearly to understand that twelve thousand a year would not buy him—that he was to be respected too.

Before long, Sir William got to be a little afraid of his new heir—so attentive, and yet so independent; so frank, and yet so firm! He was a surprise and a puzzle to him. A public school and Oxford—terrible Oxford!—had left him temperate and

moral! He had gone to Epsom without stealing anybody's money, or fighting the police! He was a wonder!

Dr. Raynor was right when he said that Percy Tremayne did not owe his good fortune to any love which Sir William bore him; but in time something as nearly approaching affection as could enter that cold, selfish heart, arose for him, and he deserved all, and more, than he got. I do not mean to say that the Oxford undergraduate developed at once into a Mechi or a Reid, but there was a good deal more content and visible prosperity upon the estate than heretofore. "It is yours—do as you please, I am content," became the baronet's constant reply when consulted as to its management.

Percy did well, and, to his credit be it recorded, put in many a good word for the absent. No power could deprive Stephen of the baronetcy, and although his father had sworn he should never set his foot in Warnstead, with a vehemence which pre-

vented any return to that subject, there were other lands with which he might support that dignity, and Warnstead had not always been in the family. Sir William made no direct replies to these hints, but did not taboo the subject.

As for Stephen himself — with two hundred and fifty pounds a year to spend as he liked, and do as he liked—he was probably happier than ever he had been in his life. Shame did not touch him. He had done nothing to be ashamed of. The shame was with those who had condemned him unheard. The heir-apparentship of Warnstead was not worth having, and as for the succession, he would see about that when the time came. In the pleasant French watering-place which he chose for his abode, he became quite a personage, studied the language, and learned to play *écarté.*

He would see about the succession when the time came. His idea was to contest an unfavourable will, on the ground of undue

influence, and the testator's dotage. For this purpose he took careful notes of all that had happened. Would a sane parent disinherit his only son because of a fuss at a card-table, and without inquiring who was to blame? Would a sane person take a young gentleman from the University, who did not know the price of a sheep, and give him the sole management of a great estate? That would be for a jury to decide. When he heard that his father was dead, and had made no will, he thought of burning those notes, but, on second thoughts, kept them.

What was to be done now? Prepare the ground, and sow seeds for future harvesting, no more for the present. Be very courteous to Percy; pretend that he preferred to live abroad; throw out a few carefully worded suggestions that his poor dear father had repented of his unconsidered condemnation, and leave the rest to time. This Willford was no fool. The family did not produce fools, whatever else it bred. But, oh!

sooner or later he would get even with Dennis—father and son. It was in this conviction that he visited the United States of America.

Shortly after the funeral, Percy Tremayne saw Mr. Dennis, and the now three years old trouble was inevitably discussed.

"Surely he can come back now, sir," urged Percy.

"Not yet," Dennis replied, sternly. "As soon as it becomes known that he could not come back at his own pleasure, but had to wait for *mine*, why then perhaps he may. I sympathise with *you*, and admire your conduct, Mr. Tremayne, and trust that, being neighbours, we may become friends, now that it is possible for me to visit Warnstead."

Jack (a captain now) wrote from Ireland, where he was quartered, to the same effect in his own free and easy way.

"Can't that poor beggar come back now, dad? All ours who were in the regiment at the time, know about it, and they'd as

soon take me for a Fenian Head Centre as a card sharper."

But again "*Not yet!*" was the reply.

This brings us down to the day when the letter written by Dr. Raynor's advice was posted to Sir Stephen Willford at New York, and forwarded after him to New Orleans. It ran as follows:

"DEAR SIR STEPHEN,

"Your letter of the 14th inst. was no doubt intended to be kind, but is not satisfactory under the circumstances in which I am placed. The sum you mention in your postscript as spent upon improvements, went, as I informed you at the time, to repair your house, and will not return a shilling unless you rent it. If you require more money than usual next year, you must raise it by sale or mortgage. Your rents, &c., will yield you less than before, because you have to provide for an agent. Sign and return the enclosed agree-

ment with me as such for five years certain, at a salary of one thousand a year, or find some one else this day three months. I do not apologise for stating the case thus dryly. A good agent has to be a man of business.

"Yours faithfully,

"PERCY TREMAYNE."

"D—n his impudence!" growled Sir Stephen. "Dennis has put him up to this, I'll swear. Five years certain! Five thousand pounds! He fancies I'm in his power, and puts on the screw, does he? I'll very soon put him in his place—the beggar! No, that won't do just now. I'll make use of him; write from here as though I had not received his letter. That will gain time. He won't throw up in three months, anyhow—he knows better."

Then the muser locked up his despatch box, and inquired what cars would take him to Goodchildren Street, and being enlightened, called at No. 195, and asked if Judge Alexander was at home.

Once a judge, always a judge, in America. Mr. Alexander had occupied the bench for about two years when he was young, and filled a good many other positions since. He had been a cotton broker, a tax collector, a lawyer again, a senator, a minister, and had all but obtained a nomination for President of the United States. But his party "dried up" and left him stranded where the sweet waters of office never reached him again. He had the reputation of being one of the most profound lawyers and best read men in the country; but that would not get him a clerkship in the humblest of its tribunals. Per contra, he was credited with the possession of a conscience which might be inflamed to use his intellectual weapons in ways that are dark, and this might easily have made him governor of his state in these latter days. But he became idle, cynical, soured, after his great disappointment. Having played for the biggest stake in the game, and lost, he threw up his cards in disgust, retired

from the bar and from society, and lived, a lonely sybarite, upon what he had made. It was enough for his wants, and to buy a book or two when something worth his perusal, that he had not read, turned up.

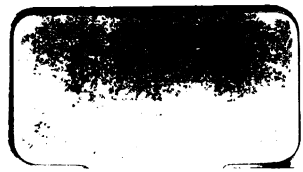
One of his specialities whilst at the bar was pedigree, particularly that of old English families settled in America, when it was His Majesty's plantations. He owed his fortune (such as it was) to the successful prosecution of a long dormant claim, on behalf of the heirs of a ne'er-do-well, who ran away from home when good Queen Anne was yet alive.

The civil war upset all his financial calculations. Hard times came for the owners of property; rents fell, taxes rose, values shrunk, and the wolf came unpleasantly near the door of No. 195, Goodchildren Street, at which we also left Sir Stephen Willford knocking. It was opened to him by a gaunt figure in its shirt sleeves, with no socks on its down-at-heel slippered feet, and two days rusty grey beard bristling its

chin. A whiff of garlic and tobacco escaped into the outer air, as it asked, "What do you want?" in a tone which implied "Confound you, for wanting anything!"

"I wish to see Judge Alexander. My name is Willford, and I have called by appointment," the visitor replied.

"So! Come in; I have been expecting you for a week," said the figure.

END OF VOL. II.

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